




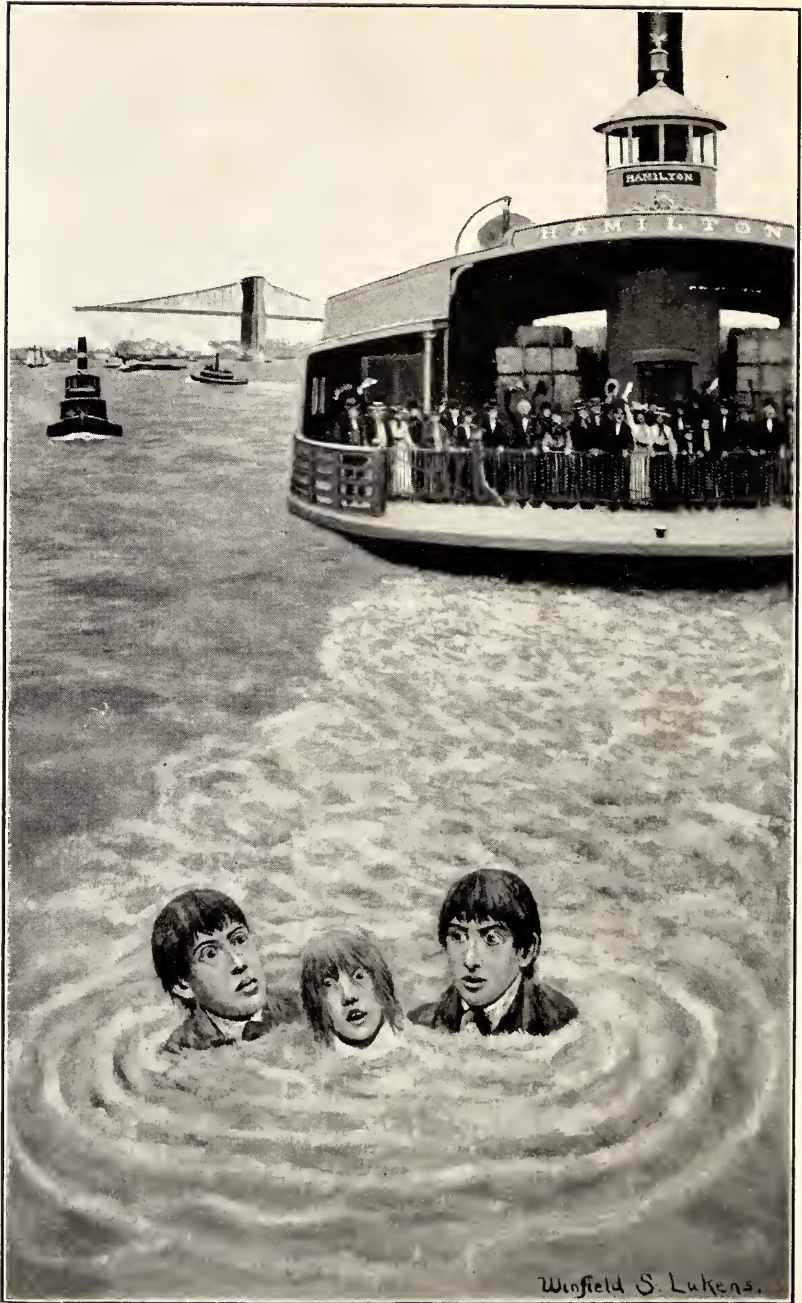
BOYS OF
BUNKER
ACADEMY
W. O. STODDARD

Ralph P. Standard
from his father.

Madison, New Jersey,
Christmas, 1893.
Miner D. Standard



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"HE'S GOT HER ON THE OTHER SIDE. SPLENDID!"

Boys of Bunker Academy

By

W. O. STODDARD

*Author of "On the Old Frontier," "Jack Morgan,"
"The Sword Maker's Son," etc.*



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Boys of Bunker Academy

CHAPTER I

A SWIM IN EAST RIVER

It was fine September weather all over the city, but that was a "blue" Monday for Pat Nolan, none the less.

"There'll be no washin' to carry around. There's something in that," he said to himself, as he strolled away down the busy street. "But it's a quare thing to have a stepfather. What'll I do wid him, anyway? Ould Maguire isn't a bad man to kape a grocery, and the like o' that, but thin to have him to kape house for. Mother says she'll do that same, and ould Maguire'll find she'll kape her word wid him, or I'm mistaken. But it's an awful thing to wake up and find you've got a stepfather."

Pat could scarcely be blamed for the way he

felt about it, little as he now remembered of his own father.

The Widow Nolan had never dreamed of consulting her fourteen-year-old son when she was considering the question of marrying Mr. Maguire and his neat little corner grocery, all his own. Perhaps, indeed, she thought she was doing a good thing for Pat as well as for his new stepfather; but the youngster would rather have carried home any number of heavy washings for her.

At least, he felt so, that morning, and he determined to take it out in a grand free ramble along the piers and docks and among the shipping.

What between his mother's customers and school-days, and the other pressing duties of his past life, he had had little enough of that sort of thing, considering what a taste he had for it. A very different-looking pair of boys were at that same moment coming down the front steps of a well-built private residence on the other side of the city. It was higher "up-town," in a more fashionable quarter than Pat Nolan or his mother, or his brand-new father, had been accus-

tomed to, but the two boys were of about Pat's age.

They were accompanied by a dignified-looking, middle-aged gentleman, who remarked, as he closed the door behind him :

"Now, Solomon, my young friend, you've only a day or two left of your vacation, and I must give you a look at the ships before you go."

"I couldn't see too much of them, Uncle Rivington. Van's shown me a good deal."

"Glad of that," said Mr. Rivington. "And you won't see any steamships up at Bunker-ville."

"Steam? Half the people around there don't know yet that steam was ever invented."

"Sol," quietly remarked the other boy, "can't we take some steam with us?"

"Not too much! Not too much!" exclaimed his father, as he noticed a sharp look exchanged by the boys. "You might blow up the academy, or even old Mrs. Porrance."

"That would be bad," said Sol. "I guess she'd 'light somewhere, sooner than most people."

Mr. Rivington gave a subdued sort of chuckle. It sounded as if he knew more about boys than

his sober, grave manners and slow speech indicated.

At all events, he hailed a passing omnibus, and they were all three in it quickly enough.

A fine pair of boys they were. Van was the taller and heavier, taking more than a little after his father, but his dark hair curled over a broad and handsome forehead, and there was a look of solid pluck in his rosy young face which promised well for his future.

Sol, on the other hand, was short and broad, with a large mouth and a pair of twinkling gray eyes that might have reminded any one who knew Pat Nolan of the squint the washerwoman's boy could send after his stepfather.

Sol was a country boy, and a Yankee one at that, and this had been his first visit to the great city. Only he and Van could have told how much they had seen of it during the eventful two weeks with which they had wound up the "season."

Vacation was over now, and the two cousins were about to start for their Winter's troubles at Bunker Academy, Van for the first time and Sol for the second. Whether to be glad or sorry was

a point upon which they were not as yet altogether clear.

Neither could any one have told, for a dead certainty, whether or not their coming would be an unmixed blessing to Bunkerville and its academy.

It is not often that the smartest boy succeeds in being an unmixed blessing. That is, to the school he is sent to, and it's just as well he is not.

Sol Rogers had so many things to stare at from the windows of that omnibus that he scarcely knew whether any time at all had passed before they got out of it and began to make their way toward the water.

"We'll take a look at the East River this morning," said Mr. Rivington, "and see how things look there."

There was plenty to look at, and Mr. Rivington had a great many things to tell in his slow, dignified sort of way. If Sol remembered it all he must have learned how to tell a ship from a brig, or a schooner, a sloop, a bark, from anything else. Then there were steamships, tugs, propellers, river steamers, Sound steamers, lighters, oyster-boats,

yachts, and all sorts of things that float and flurry around on the water.

At last they all got upon a ferry-boat, to have a ride back and forth, and a good look down the harbor.

The boat was not crowded at that time of day, but there were plenty of people aboard of her, nevertheless, and great express-wagons piled with boxes and packages, and huge drays heaped with merchandise, and a good many other things to keep the eyes of a country boy busy.

For all that, Sol had not failed to see the prettiest thing on board, and neither had Van, or old Mr. Rivington himself.

Such a little fairy of a German girl, with shining golden curls and a sunny, childish face, that laughed all over and all the while. She was attended only by a very elderly couple, either one of whom weighed altogether too much to be expected to follow that little midget in all her racings to and fro.

They had contented themselves, like Mr. Rivington and the boys, by remaining at the stern of the boat, but they did not seem to be gazing at anything in particular. Now and then the old

lady roused herself enough to utter a wheezy "Katrina!"

But as soon as the little curly head had been turned toward her with its irresistible laugh of pleasure, the look of placid content had returned, and Katrina had things all her own way again.

Alas for Katrina!

How should she have bothered her small and merry brain about swells? Such great rolls of water as the big Sound steamers heave up from their pushing sides and send away to the right and left of them for the disturbance of smaller craft!

The ferry-boat was not a small one by any means, but she could not help rocking a little on that swell; and she did so just at the moment when poor Katrina had ventured a step too near the perilous edge of the deck, beyond the guards, dodging under the chains to do so.

A shrill cry of childish fear, a flutter, a splash, and then for a moment everybody seemed to be holding their breath in horror!

Katrina was overboard!

The poor old couple, grandfather and grandmother, were on their feet now, holding out

their helpless, trembling hands, and it looked as if they were trying to shout "Katrina!" but could not find their voices.

Just then another form—not a large or tall one—stood out for an instant on the guards, and then there was another splash.

"Brave boy!" exclaimed Mr. Rivington.

But still another form sprang forward, and another plunge followed the first, as if it had been a game of "follow my leader."

"Good Heavens, Van, your cousin has jumped in! Can he swim, do you know? Can he swim?"

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Van, "if I only knew how! I'll learn, the first thing I do. Sol says he can swim like a duck."

"You must learn, my boy, you must learn. And yet I'm half glad you don't know how, to-day. Two are enough, and the tide's running pretty fast. See them! The red-headed boy's got hold of her. There's Sol. He can swim, that's a fact. He's catching up. He's got her on the other side. Splendid!"

The air fairly rang with the shouts and cheers of the ferry-boat passengers, and those on another

boat that was passing near joined in the burst of acclamation. New York people know very well that it is no joke to jump into the East River when the tide is running.

The boys had been poking a good deal of fun that morning at the puffy little tugboats that were steaming and dodging around so swiftly in all directions. Sol said they looked more like water-spiders than anything else.

But it was one of the very smallest and sauciest of these busy workers that came along at the right time now. Neither of the great, clumsy ferry-boats could have swung around soon enough, nor would they have been of much use if they had, except to run over and drown the two brave boys and their golden-haired prize.

"She's not much of a lift for the two of us," remarked Pat Nolan.

"Not much," said Sol; "but where'd we better swim for?"

"Oh, they'll pick us up before we've gone far. If they don't, we can get ashore on Governor's Island."

At the rate the tide was bearing them along that did not seem an entire impossibility, but just

then the bit of a tug came snorting and coughing within a few yards of them, and a deep, hoarse voice shouted :

“Hand her up, boys ! You’re the men for my money !”

Long arms and strong were reached out for the dripping Katrina, while a great cheer arose from the crowds on the ferry-boats.

“She’s safe now, boys,” remarked the same deep voice, a bit huskier ; “now you’d better swim ashore.”

“Had we ?” returned Pat. “Now, if you don’t let us right in we’ll tip your tug over.”

It was a big man that owned the big voice, and it was almost dangerous for him to laugh as he did in so small a craft as that tug, but he helped the two boys in without any further nonsense, and shook hands with them tremendously after he got them on board.

“You’re a Yankee, I can see that,” he said to Sol. “I was born on Cape Cod myself. And this other one’s Irish from head to foot.”

“So I am,” said Pat, proudly ; “but I was born in the ould Fourth Ward, for all that. I’m as good a Yankee as you are.”

The big man laughed again, but he was steaming along behind the ferry-boat now, and she had scarcely entered her dock before Katrina's grandparents were getting themselves dreadfully wet with hugging her.

"She isn't hurt a bit," said Sol, as he clambered up from the tug.

"Not by the swim she had," replied Pat; "but thim ould folks'll squaze the life out of her instead of the water. Sure and I'd not like to be hugged in German."

There was no chance for any further talk between the two heroes, for they were surrounded now by an admiring crowd that seemed to appreciate very highly the brave deed they had so skilfully performed.

Again and again did Van Rivington declare his intention of learning to swim at the very first opportunity, and Sol comforted him with:

"Cords of 'em around Bunkerville. Lakes and ponds no end. Go swimming every Saturday."

As for Mr. Rivington himself, proud as he was of the conduct of his nephew, he did not seem disposed to overlook the plucky Irish boy who

had first gone in after Katrina. The old grandparents had not enough of English at their command to tell how grateful they were, but Katrina put up her sweet little face, rather pale just now, to kiss each one of her preservers, and they both felt more than paid for their wetting.

That, indeed, was a somewhat serious thing for Pat Nolan, for he had worn his Sunday clothes that day, in honor of the event which had given him a stepfather and a new home. Nor was he quite sure what view would be taken of the matter by Mr. Maguire.

The sight-seeing was over for that morning, as a matter of course, for Mr. Rivington hurried his nephew away homeward after some dry clothing. He did not do so, however, until he had forced the somewhat reluctant Pat to give directions as to where and how he could be found again.

"That's a fine boy, Van. I don't mean to lose sight of him. He isn't the least bit of a fool."

"I was almost fool enough myself, father," said Van, "to have gone in after that little girl, even though I couldn't swim."

"So a half a dozen others would have had to

risk their lives for you, eh? No, Van, I'm not afraid you will ever show yourself a coward, but you must never lose your presence of mind or your common sense—not even if the prettiest kind of a little curly-headed girl has tumbled into the water.”

“Then I must learn to swim.”

“Don't learn it half way, then. Learn to swim like Pat Nolan or Sol Rogers, so that you can be of some use to others as well as yourself.”

“You see if I don't,” said Van, decidedly, and then he added: “I wonder what sort of schooling Pat Nolan has had.”

“Pretty good, I guess. That is, if he has been to the public schools.”

“He does not know any Greek and Latin then, if that's all.”

“No, but no amount of Greek and Latin will fit a man or a boy for a swim in the East River.”

“And that's where Pat is ahead.”

As for Sol Rogers, he was wonderfully silent all the way home.

Mr. and Mrs. Maguire were not at home very early that day. They were not of the sort to waste time and money on useless “bridal trips,”

but they had been taking the world very easy, for all that, and by the time they made their appearance in the little parlor over the grocery it was nearly tea-time, and Pat Nolan's clothes were dry as a bone.

He had aired them—pressed them; he had even called in the aid of the little one-eyed tailor around the corner, who had made them look as good as new. Then, a clean shirt, a fresh polish on his shoes, and nothing in his outer man told tales of his jump into the river.

“I'm not a bit ashamed of it,” he said, to himself, “and I'd as lief tell mother as not, but I'm not sure of Mr. Maguire; I'll know him better after I've lived wid him longer.”

There was wisdom in that, although it may be Pat Nolan was unduly suspicious of his new father.

Mrs. Maguire and her husband were a trifle tired with their day's unaccustomed “shopping,” and all that sort of thing, and the latter had bought an evening newspaper to read while his blooming bride was getting tea.

Blooming she was, for Pat's mother was only half-way between thirty and forty, and a woman

for any son or husband to be proud of, barring a tendency to having her own way. Pat had found that out long ago, and he was more than half sure Mr. Maguire would make the same discovery in due time.

She was just about sending her nice, dry, hungry boy out on some little errand or other, when Mr. Maguire suddenly bounced from his chair, with the newspaper in his hand, exclaiming:

“Pat Nolan, was it yersilf did that same? Did yez jump into the Aist River afther the bit of a Dutch gurrel? Oh, but ye’re young to git yersilf into the papers!”

“Into the river?” almost shouted Mrs. Maguire; “and all your nice clothes sp’iled wid the water?”

“But he saved the gurrel.”

“There was two of us,” doubtfully protested poor Pat.

“Two of yez?” retorted his mother. “Sure, an’ wasn’t wan enough?”

“She was such a pretty girl,” pleaded Pat, “and I couldn’t bear to stand still and see her drown. Besides, I’m all nice and dry now ——”

“Nice and dry, is it, after jumpin’ into the

river? An' ye might have been dhrownded yersilf, an' what wud yer poor mother have done thin?"

"Now, mother ——"

But Mrs. Maguire's fault-finding had been more a matter of habit, and therefore not to be helped, than anything more serious, and now the idea that her one darling had been in danger, that he had made a hero of himself, saved somebody's life and got into the newspapers, was rapidly becoming too much for her.

She dropped her saucepan, gave one of her eyes a rub with the corner of her apron, threw her plump arms around Patrick's neck and half sobbed:

"Ah, now, Pat, me own b'y! it's loike ye. Ye're an honor to yer poor mother, so ye are. Was she a purty gurrel, Pathrick?"

"Indeed she was, mother. A little bit of a thing. I got to her first, but the other boy was a real good one ——"

Just then there came a loud knock at the door, and Pat's stepfather was interrupted in the midst of a declaration that he was "an honor to the name of Maguire," by the necessity of opening it.

Pat scarcely had time for a rebellious thought that his name was not Maguire at all, when he found himself face to face with Mr. Rivington.

That worthy gentleman had been more than a little stirred up by the morning's adventure, and as soon as his down-town business was finished that afternoon, he had started home with the determination of hunting up his young Irish hero on the way.

"Not exactly poor," he had said to himself, as he climbed the stairs. "Shouldn't wonder if my notion about him can be made to work."

And what sort of a "notion" could such a man as Mr. Rivington have formed concerning a boy like Pat Nolan, of whom he knew so little, and who had no manner of a claim upon him?

Well, it was not a bad one, and it was not long in coming to the front.

Mrs. Maguire's motherly heart was ready to burst with pride over what her elegant visitor had to say concerning Pat's exploit, and she could scarcely find words to tell her own opinion of him.

"Such a foine scholar, too, yer honor. It's little more they can tache him at the schule."

Mr. Rivington may have had his doubts on

that head, for he caught a queer look in Pat's dancing eyes just then, but it gave him an opportunity and he used it.

The story was not a long one, but it can be shortened.

His own boy, Van Rensselaer Rivington, and his cousin, Solomon Rogers, from New England, were going away to school at the very famous Bunker Academy at Bunkerville. They were to be fitted there for college. It was a grand school for a boy like Pat Nolan.

"But the cost of it, yer honor, for the loikes of us?"

Oh, that was what he was coming to! Van and Sol were to board with a Mrs. Porrance, and she had expressed a wish for some stout, active young fellow, who would work out his board, or half of it, while attending the academy.

He, Mr. Rivington, would be responsible for that part of it. The school fees were nothing, or next door to it, in such a case. He would look out for that also.

All Mrs. Maguire and her new husband would have to do would be to clothe and furnish books for the young student. He would really be

less expensive to them than if he remained in the city.

Mr. Maguire had scarcely said a word up to that time; but he now jumped up and held out his hand to Mr. Rivington with a heartiness that did him credit.

“Go, sor!” he exclaimed. “Of coorse he’ll go. It’s the first thing I’ve been able to do for his mother since we were married, and I’m proud to say it, sor—he shall go, if it takes the last cint she’s got, sor!”

Mrs. Maguire had turned to Pat, almost crying, with :

“Oh, Pat, do you really want to go and lave yer poor mother?”

But the love of learning, or some other feeling, was stronger in the boy’s mind, just then, than any ties that bound him to the home over the corner grocery.

Had she still been the Widow Nolan, it would have made some difference; but, as it was, he could scarcely contain his eagerness, as he responded :

“Will I go? Is that it? Will I breathe? Oh, mother, say the word!”

"I will, then! Yes, sor, and it's grateful I am the day. But whin must he be ready?"

"I shall write to Mrs. Porrance to-night. This is Monday. He can be ready to start with the other boys on Wednesday, can he not?"

"'Dade and he can, sor. It's ready he'll be if I work both the nights for him. Ah, Mr. Denny Maguire, it's the good husband yez'll have to be to me while me b'y is gone!"

Mr. Maguire was trying to look fatherly just then, rather than sentimental, and Mr. Rivington was in something of a hurry to get home, so that the bride's appeal was partly thrown away.

As for Pat, he was made especially proud by a parting request to come and get acquainted with the other boys, and to receive such further directions as might be deemed necessary to give him.

Mr. Rivington could scarcely have reached the sidewalk, and Mrs. Maguire and her husband were just beginning to think again about their supper, as was Pat himself, for that matter, when there came another knock at the door.

"The gintleman's come back for something!" exclaimed Mr. Maguire, as he put his hand on the knob, but, when he swung it wide, a tall,

well-dressed man, an unmistakable Teuton, stood upon the threshold.

"Does a boy named Nolan, Padrick Nolan, lif here?"

"My name is Maguire ——"

"So? Dank you. I looks for de prave boy dat safe my Katrina. His name is Nolan."

"There he stands, sor. Proud I am to call him me son."

"You mane he's the son of your wife, Misther Maguire," firmly interrupted his bride. "Patrick, the gintleman is asking for you."

There was scarcely any need to say that, for the German already had his hands on Pat's shoulders, as if in great doubt whether to hug him or not.

He did not hug him, but he said several things in German, as if no other tongue than his own would carry him through. It is quite likely, however, that he was half astonished when Pat replied to him modestly, and quite correctly, in the same language.

"Mrs. Maguire!" exclaimed her husband, in a loud whisper, "Patrick is talking Dutch."

"Sure and why not, when he's heard it all his

life? Half the children at all the schools he iver went to was one kind of German or another. He can almost talk Frinch."

"What a help he'd be to the grocery," muttered Mr. Maguire. "It's little more schoolin' he nades."

"He'll get it, then. It'll be hard to part wid him, but he's a-goin', sure."

Pat overheard all, of course, and it interfered a little with his answers to the stranger.

The latter, who gave his name as Becker, and who seemed to think he could not say enough to the preserver of his little daughter, also heard and understood. He even asked a few pertinent questions, and then he, too, made Pat promise to pay him a visit at an address he gave before leaving town.

"Come alone," he added, in German, and Pat promptly determined to do that very thing.

It was just as well he did so, for before supper was over, the fact of the invitation was under discussion, and Mr. Maguire heartily declared:

"Is it go and see him? Of coorse you will. I'll go wid you mesilf, and see that ye behave yersilf in a way to do credit to the family."

Pat's mother handed him an unusually large piece of cake just then, and he caught a look which made him keep still.

Pat had no end of love for his mother, and he relished that cake better than any other piece he ever had.

* * * * *

There is a whole basketful of villages like Bunkerville, if it were possible to measure them that way, scattered here and there among the hills of New England.

However they may differ from one another, they are pretty sure to have strong points of resemblance.

Every "Bunkerville," of whatever name, has its academy, where the teaching is sometimes very good and sometimes is decidedly otherwise. There is sure to be a mill-stream running through a valley, and if there are no factories there is a gristmill, or two of them, and a sawmill. There would be more sawmills if the hills, for miles around, had not long ago been stripped of their heavy timber.

However, although the old forests are gone, the scrubby "second growth" of beech and

maple and oak-trees has crept up the barren slopes, from the edges of the little ponds and lakes which nestle everywhere, and some kinds of game are coming back to their old haunts.

The farms, except in favored valleys, are not of the best, and the stalwart young men who grow up on them and are educated at the academies are apt to dream of richer lands elsewhere, and "go West" when they become of age. It is a very good thing for the West that they do so, but it is not so good for New England and for Bunkerville.

Still, when they have boys of their own, later in life, they are very apt to send them back for a few years of schooling in the shadow of the old hills, and that is good for the academies.

The Bunkerville we are to deal with lay in a long hollow, like so many of the others, and was so far north that from any considerable elevation, say from a housetop or the academy steeple, you could see the ragged line of the White Mountains jagging and rolling away to the westward.

Among those wonderful mountains the village boys were sure to tell each open-mouthed newcomer there were deer and bears and panthers,

not to speak of smaller wild animals of all sorts, but none of these had ever been known to venture among the shady and well-kept streets of the pretty village of Bunkerville.

The academy was a capital specimen of its class, being large and well built, of wood, and its white walls contained ample accommodations for the three hundred and more of pupils, of both sexes and all ages for whom it proposed to furnish "book learning."

Every such institution is compelled to have at its head a man who, so long as he is "principal," is regarded by all the people round about as the most learned man in the world. Sometimes he is too modest a man to disagree with his neighbors, and gets to think so himself.

However that might be about the Rev. Dr. Betts, of Bunker Academy, everybody in the valley looked up to him.

They had to do it, for the doctor's body, like his mind, had grown very fast while he was about it, and he was a man who would have been of "great weight" in any community.

He was a married man, but Mrs. Betts had nothing to do with the young ladies' half of

the academy, that important matter having been in the care of Miss McCracken for more years than she cared to speak of.

And yet she was a very wonderful woman in her way, and she had a very profound respect for Dr. Betts.

Bunker Academy was not a "boarding-school" in the ordinary sense of the term. Few New England academies are. Nor were there any regular boarding-houses for students, male or female, but the villagers were generally able to take care of all who came, and at very reasonable rates.

It was the better way, for it mingled a good deal of honest freedom with something of the restraints of home, and split up the mischievous tendencies of the young people in a way to make them less dangerous than if they had all been packed and crammed into one or two buildings.

Mrs. Porrance, therefore, did not keep a boarding-house. Indeed, some of her neighbors often wondered "why a woman so well to do as Widder Porrance should go to any such trouble."

They even hinted that she was a little "near," and liked to make more money than she really needed, but that was when there was no danger

of its getting to the ears of Mrs. Porrance, for the portly, stern-visaged widow was a social power in Bunkerville.

Nobody had to look twice in her face before discovering that she was a woman every way capable of minding her own business, and quite likely to insist upon other people minding theirs.

And so it came to pass, one September afternoon, a few days before the fall term was to begin, that Mrs. Porrance received a letter from Mr. Rivington. She knew all about him, for his nephew, Sol Rogers, had boarded with her the previous winter, and his son Van was now to be added. Still, there was something in that letter which seemed to require thought. She was all alone, and so she thought aloud, which was a very uncommon thing for Mrs. Porrance to do.

"Yes, I know I mentioned it to him, but I scarcely imagined he'd do it. A bright, active, industrious sort of boy, he says. Been at the public schools. Don't suppose they're much. Not beside Bunker Academy, anyhow. Still, he may get along. Saved a little girl's life, too. I like that. It's an awful thing to be drowned, only there are some folks that couldn't do much

better, so far as the rest of the world is concerned. That's a dreadful uncharitable thing for me to say, I s'pose. But then he's Irish. I don't know much about 'em. Mr. Rivington says he was born in this country, too. Well, if I can't get along with him, nobody can. I'll try him. Only that settles the matter. I won't have that other lot. Three boys is all I'll have in my house at one time, for love or money. Glad I can say as much to Mrs. Hinckley. I didn't want her great sprawling yawps of boys, anyhow. I'll just send her word that my house is full. Three boys, and one of 'em Irish. Guess I'll have my hands full, and Almira, too. Oh, dear me!"

If that last sigh was raised over the prospect before her, what on earth made her consent to undertake it?

What, indeed? But then there are some things that are never understood until—well, not until you understand them.

Boys, for instance.

And girls.

And men.

And women.

CHAPTER II

OFF FOR BUNKERVILLE

THE evening after the rescue of little Katrina Becker was a very remarkable one for Pat Nolan.

So it was for his mother and for Mr. Maguire himself.

As for Pat, he had been the merriest chap in that street from the day he first began to play in it, and nobody would have suspected him of anything but mischief, faithful as he had always been in carrying home the baskets of clean clothes to his mother's customers.

But do you suppose a boy of that sort, with two such eyes in his head, and a public school to set him a-going, does not have ideas of his own?

Pat had seen plenty of rich people. He had even been in their houses, many a time, on one errand or another, and he knew very well how much nicer places they were to live in than the

tenement-house to which he was compelled to return from every one of those visits.

Then, too, he had read, in the books he had managed to get hold of, of other boys as poor as himself who worked their way up to wealth and elegance.

He had seen, and he had read, and, of course, he had dreamed.

Great, splendid dreams of the future that might come to him, some day.

And he had somehow got it settled in his young mind that the first step upward for him was to "get an education."

That was what was the matter with Pat Nolan that evening, with Mr. Rivington's offer ringing in his ears, and he could scarcely have told whether he spent most of his time indoors or out.

If he could have got rid of Mr. Maguire it would have been nice to have talked it all over with his mother, but the worthy grocer was not to be gotten rid of at all.

"I'm a home sort of a body," he had said to his new wife, in Pat's hearing. "Ye'll niver have to luk far for the loike of me. I'm fond of me own foireside."

There was no fire in the house to speak of on that warm September evening, though Mr. Maguire managed to make things hot for himself before bedtime.

The longer he thought the matter over the more clearly he saw how valuable Pat could be made in the grocery, with his knowledge of German. Even the French might come in play at times. Such a boy, with no wages to pay and no chance of his leaving for a better position, was not to be thrown away without an effort.

Thus, too, Mr. Maguire thought of the expense. He had been liberal enough in his remarks to Mr. Rivington, for he knew very well that Pat's mother had some pretty savings of her own. Her first husband had left her something, and she had thriftily added to it. Maguire did not know how much there was, and she did not intend he should, but he knew she had an account at a savings bank. Perhaps he had even gone so far as to calculate how much he could do in the grocery line with a little more capital.

To be sure, it was too soon after the wedding to mention such a thing as that, but it would never do to have the golden store squandered on

a New England academy, and lose Pat's services at the same time.

The thing grew on him every minute, and before long Mr. Maguire found himself skilfully edging round to it in the talk that he was having with his rosy bride.

She began to get rosier and rosier while he did so, until at last she was what people call "red in the face."

When a good-looking Irish woman begins to get red in the face about a boy of her own, it is time for the public peacemaker to come around in a hurry, for there is likely to be a job for him.

Mr. Maguire thought so that evening, at all events, and long before the high color subsided, and the little parlor became silent and comfortable for him again, he had given up, for the time being, all thoughts of having Pat in the grocery right away.

"I'll go and dhraw the money in the mornin'," exclaimed Mrs. Maguire, in winding up her remarks. "The b'y shall have his buks and things av it takes the last cint. He's not a Maguire, I'd have ye to know, and the Nolans was gentry in the ould country."

“So was the Maguires!”

“Was they, indade? I’m glad av it, seein’ I’ve married intil the family; but they’re no great things on this side of the wather. I tell ye, me b’y shall have ivery chance I can give him. Many’s the hard day’s worruk I’ve put in for that same. Me money’s me own, Misther Maguire.”

He was beginning to understand that, and he took a sharp turn in his diplomacy.

“Sure an’ I meant well by Pat. It’s a marchant I’d make of him. Ye needn’t turn up yer nose at commerce and trade. Mebbe he’ll be glad enough to come back till it wid all the learnin’ he’ll find in the ’cademy. It’s a foine, likely b’y he is. And he’s wondherful good-lookin’. ’Dade, an’ he takes afther his mother.”

“Now, Misther Maguire!”

But blarney was his stronghold just then, and there was no stopping him.

Meanwhile, Pat had slipped off up-stairs, to the little corner room next the roof, which had been assigned to him. He tried, for a while, to read an old novel he had managed to pick up, but it was of no sort of use, so he went to bed.

To bed—to sleep?

Well, no. Not very soon. He had some hours of feverish tossing around first. When he did close his eyes, it was to dream the most remarkable set of dreams. There was no telling how many German girls he swam for, from how many ferry-boats, or how many times he found himself learned and rich, and all that sort of thing. They would have been elegant dreams, for the greater part, if he could have kept Mr. Maguire's face out of them, but the impossibility of doing that nearly spoiled them all. It might have been better if he had known what a true-hearted and plucky sort of a guardian angel his own mother was turning into.

Next morning was like the others in one respect. There were no bundles or baskets for Pat to travel around with.

Mr. Maguire was busy in the grocery after breakfast, and he had half a notion, even then, of calling Pat to his assistance; but it would scarcely have been advisable. Indeed, it was soon out of the question, for Mrs. Maguire herself was busy with Pat.

She made him polish his shoes till their bright-

ness was almost painful to the eye. Then she brushed his hair till any more brushing would have been painful to Pat.

"A nater, claner-lukin' b'y, in fact, niver walked!" and Pat himself was very glad to have it so, for he had his morning's business cut out for him.

He was to go, first, to Mr. Rivington's and get his instructions as to books, the journey to Bunkerville, and so forth. Then he was to come home and get some money, for his mother would by that time have drawn it from the savings bank. After that the purchases would be made and their other plans talked over.

Pat thought he had never loved his mother so much before in all his life. Perhaps because he had never before known how fully she sympathized with his dreams and his ambitions, and how determined she was to help him.

"I'd like to make her queen of the whole country," he said to himself, as he walked rapidly away. "But then I'd want old Maguire to be drowned first, or take himself out of this in some way. He knows I don't like him, and I'll be bound he doesn't like me."

Pat was wrong there. His new stepfather had no special dislike for him. On the contrary, he saw very clearly what a promising boy Pat was, and how much money might be made out of him—with the help of his mother.

And that there seemed to be no immediate hope of getting.

It was easy enough to find Mr. Rivington's house, and that gentleman was at home. So were Van Rivington and Sol Rogers, and they greeted Pat with thoroughly boyish cordiality. He was a sort of a hero in their eyes, and if there is anything a sound-minded boy will go out to with his whole heart it is a "hero." Especially a boy hero.

The list of books made out by Mr. Rivington was shorter than Pat had expected.

"That will do very well to start on. The boys themselves have some that you can use, and you can have others sent you as they are wanted."

"But how am I to get there?"

"Get there? Oh, that's easy enough. Have your trunk at the Grand Central Depot in time for the two o'clock train to-morrow afternoon, and go right along with Sol and Van."

Go with them ?

He, the washerwoman's son, to make a journey with two boys like Van and Sol, who lived in such a house as that ?

Pat felt his cheeks tingle, but every drop of blood in his body seemed to assure him.

"It's all right. You're as good as they are. Boys that can risk their lives and save the lives of other people are anybody's equals."

Perhaps he would have felt differently if he had been a "slouch" or a coward. It would have really been very different, then, and no amount of good clothes or money would have made up for it. Boys understand that as well as men do, and it's a pity so many people try to shut their eyes to the fact.

"Rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gold, for all that."

Robbie Burns was only a Scotch peasant when he sang his songs, but the great world is singing them yet, "for a' that, and a' that," because he was a true-hearted man "for a' that."

Don't forget Robbie Burns and his songs, boys, not one of you.

Still, Mr. Rivington had work of his own, and Sol and Van had plans of their own for their last day in the city. Very likely they, too, had some purchases to make.

At all events, kind as they were, Pat's visit was necessarily a short one, and he found himself on his way home a good deal sooner than he expected.

"Mother won't be back from the bank so soon as this," he said to himself. "I'd better take a street car and go down town to Mr. Becker's. 'Twon't take long, and I'll be sure of not having old Maguire with me."

The very thought of going to the academy seemed to have helped Pat in correcting his pronunciation.

He found himself speaking with a good deal of care, but the rich, full accent he was born to would linger in the tones of his young voice in spite of him.

And it was every bit as well, for there was a wonderful deal of music in it.

The address Katrina's father had given him took him to a somewhat quiet but very respectable street, on the west side of the city, and Pat

was a trifle surprised when he read the little sign at the side of the door.

“So he’s a doctor,” he said, as he pulled the door-bell. “They say some of these German doctors know a great deal. I’ll never know enough for that. I’m not the sort they make doctors out of, anyhow ——”

Just then the door swung open wide, and right there before him was the bit of a bright, sunny, happy little German girl after whom he had jumped into the East River. A very lady-like, middle-aged woman stood beside her, but before either she or Pat could say a word little Katrina uttered a loud cry of delight, and sprang away into a sort of office or study at the left of the entry, shouting :

“Papa! papa! I know him. Here he is. I knew him right away!”

“Is Dr. Becker in?”

“Is your name Nolan?”

Question and answer followed each other quickly enough, and so did the doctor himself follow Katrina, and then Pat was fairly astonished at the vigor of the welcome he received from Katrina’s mother.

He had called so soon, he told them, because he was about to go away into the country to school, and he added :

“ I owe all that to Katrina.”

“ Owe it to Katrina ? How is that ? ”

Pat somewhat bashfully and hesitatingly explained the state of the case, and was surprised, as he did so, to see a deep flush, like anger, rising in the face of the German doctor.

“ So ! ” testily exclaimed the latter. “ Vat vas his pizness ? Do I let him bay my debts for me ? You save my leetle girl and he send you to school for it ? Vot haf he to do mit Katrina ? I shtand it not. Vas I poor, eh ? ”

Pat scarcely knew what answer to make, especially as Katrina's mother entered into her husband's view of the case with singular heartiness.

It was almost as if Pat himself had given some cause of offense, and he reached out his hand for his hat, which he had laid on the study-table.

That was the signal for another and a different sort of outburst.

“ I haf you come to see me,” explained Dr. Becker, “ so I talk mit you alone. I tink of all

sort of tings I do for you. Now you come, and all is done before I know. I dell you. He does it not alone. I vill help. Vat pooks you vant? Vat oder tings, eh? You must let me, my tear poy."

Pat had very proudly and heroically intended that he would not accept of any kind of reward from Katrina's father, and under ordinary circumstances he would have kept his purpose, but there was really no help for it. He was compelled to show his list.

"Gif it to me. I send dem to you. Dey shall be a bresent from Katrina."

Pat looked at Katrina, whose blue eyes were just then wearing a somewhat earnest and wistful expression, and he slowly handed over the bit of paper.

It occurred to him, however, that his mother must be waiting by this time, and he said as much to his new friends.

"Your moder? Yes. You dell her I nefer forget, so long as I lif. I do all I can for de prave poy dat safe my leetle girl from de vater."

Pat had already learned that she had been on a visit to her grandparents, in Brooklyn, when

the accident occurred, but that this had been thereupon promptly cut short by her father, as he said :

“Before dey drown her altogedder.”

He could not promise to see them again before he left town, but the doctor insisted that he must write and say how he was getting on, and that he must not neglect them when he returned.

It was all very well. Nicer than anything Pat had known before in all his life, and when he was at last making out to say “Good-bye,” Katrina put something into his hand that felt like a pocketbook, and the doctor remarked :

“Dat is all right. Ven I was a poy at school, sometimes I vant a good many t’ings. Poys is poys. You know not joost vat you vants dill you get away at school. I vas dere. Goot-pye!”

And Pat felt a good deal like crying for some reason or other as he slipped that little wallet into his trousers pocket and hurried down the front steps.

He had even gone several blocks before it occurred to him to take it out for a look at its contents, and when he did so he almost wanted to carry it back.

Dr. Becker could scarcely have been a rich man, but the little pocketbook was by no means empty.

Pat looked at bill after bill in a sort of fever. None of them were large, to be sure, but he counted up to twenty dollars, and then he shut it up, put it back into his pocket, and hurried along towards home as fast as he could walk.

Rich? Why, he was beginning to feel like a rich man already.

Only he knew very well that twenty dollars would not keep such a house as Mr. Rivington's.

It takes all sorts of events to make up a day, and even if some of them are very good and pleasant that is no sign they will all be of the same sort.

Alas for Mrs. Maguire and her grand dreams for the future of her heroic boy!

Of all things in the world, who would have dreamed that the savings bank, that particular one in which she had trusted her savings, should decide to close its doors that morning?

Little the managers of it thought how many plans, of how many worthy people, would be upset entirely by the failure of their precious "institution."

Perhaps they did not care as much as they should have cared about that part of the very ugly business.

Then again, perhaps, they felt very badly indeed. It is not always easy to tell about such things. Anyhow, the bank had stopped paying money, and there was no certainty when it would begin again, if ever.

Mrs. Maguire was "struck all in a lape," as she expressed it, and before she recovered her presence of mind she found herself at home, telling the doleful story to her husband.

Sympathy?

Oh, yes, she received any amount of that, only it came in queer ways.

Such a scolding as she got for trusting all her fortune in "that ould, rotten, rattle-thrap of a bank. Sure an' I could ha' tould yez betther than all that av ye'd axed me. It's not mesilf wastes me hard earnin's in that way. And now what'll the b'y do? He'll niver get to the 'cademy at all. Perhaps it's all for the best. I'll just take him into the grocery and make a man of him. But he'll be disapp'inted-like."

"Will he, indade? Thin he won't and that's

the truth. Do ye s'pose I lift all me money in the bank? Sure and I'll sell me government bonds, but I'll sind Pat to school."

Government bonds!

Mr. Maguire fairly held his breath with astonishment.

Had he married an heiress unawares?

A washerwoman with that sort of property, and all her own!

He could scarcely contain himself.

"Hurroo for that! How many of thim have ye got? Arrah, but ye're the woman for me. Sell them, is it? No, indade. I put me fut on that. Ye'll niver squander them while I've a worrud to spake foreninst it."

But Mr. Maguire was not to learn, just then, whether his wife's first husband had left her much or little, or how much she had added thereto.

The amount was not likely to be very large, at the best, and it had not been scraped together with any eye to the wishes of Mr. Maguire.

It was just at that moment that Pat Nolan himself came into the little parlor, all breathless

with haste, and flushed with the excitement of his morning's adventures.

"Oh, Pat, Pat, me b'y, the bank's bruk!"

"The savings bank?"

"Bruk enthirely, and I've no money to buy yer buks."

"And I say she'll not sill any bonds for that same," almost savagely interrupted Mr. Maguire.

"Howld yer tongue! Sure an' I'll sill the head aff me shoulders widout axing lave of the loike of yez."

"Oh, mother, mother, the books won't cost you a cent. I'll tell you all about it. Little Katrina ——"

"The Dutch gurrel!" exclaimed Mr. Maguire, with a strong twist of disgust on his manly features. "Sure an' I moight ha' known there was thruble to come from that same. I'll niver kape wan of 'em from dhrownin'."

"But, Pat, me son, how'll ye iver get to Bunkerville widout money? And money ye shall have, too."

"I'll tell you all about it, mother. I'm sure to go. I've money enough in my pocket, now."

"Is it sthalin' ye've been, the day?" sternly demanded Mr. Maguire.

"Sthalin'? My b'y a thafe? Is it that, Mr. Maguire? And I not three days' yer wife! That I should iver hear the loike o' that!"

"Thin it's more o' that same Dutch gurrel. 'Dade, an' I almost wish I could swim."

Mr. Maguire's feelings were evidently too much swayed by his interests, and his curiosity overcame for the moment, his dread of his bride's indignation.

"How much did they give yez, Pat?" he asked. "Sure, a gurrel o' that size is worth a hape o' money. The funeral expinses wud ha' been a considherable dale."

Dr. Becker had probably not taken that matter into consideration, but it was a very practical fact, nevertheless, and Pat Nolan had saved him the undertaker's bill, beyond a question. He had somehow determined, however, not to show Katrina's present to his stepfather.

"It's not much," he said, with an effort to keep cool, "but it'll buy my railway tickets."

"Thim things costs a great dale o' money. Ye'd betther let me take care of it for ye. Yer

mother might put it intil the savings bank and ye'd lose it, sure."

"Yer own pocket is good enough for yez, Pat," said Mrs. Maguire, with a severe glance at her husband. "Ye're no thafe ——"

"That's more than the bank fellows can say of thimselves."

"Thru for ye, Mr. Maguire. It's the first good word ye've spoken the day. Tell me all about it, Pat. Did ye see Misther Rivington?"

There was no holding back his story any longer, and Pat told it all, in spite of the intense eagerness with which the grocer listened and the frequency with which he interrupted with one kind of exclamation and another.

"Did ye till them I'd married yer mother?" he asked, as Pat closed his rapid narration. "Did ye say I was ready to spake a good worrud fer yez, av they'd come to me? It's a grand settin' up I'd ha' given ye, as sure as my name's Maguire."

"Hush, Misther Maguire," said Pat's mother, in whose eyes the tears of maternal pride and pleasure had been gathering. "The b'y's made his own frinds and he'll kape thim widout any

hile. He'll be prisidint yet. Or mebbe it's a lawyer they'll make of him. It's little I care which, and both of 'em pays bettther 'n a grocery."

"That depinds on the size of the grocery," sagely remarked Mr. Maguire, who had had lawyers among his customers in his day, though not any presidents that he could just then call to mind.

The interests of his business were likely to suffer that morning if more customers came than his "young man" could attend to, for there were endless questions yet to be asked of Pat Nolan.

Very prompt, too, must have been Dr. Becker's own movements, for even while they were talking, and that was scarcely two hours after Pat's return, a heavy package was delivered at the door below, and Mr. Maguire himself rushed down the stairs to bring it up.

"My books!" shouted Pat. "Oh, mother! mother! It's my books!"

The warm-hearted German had rushed out at once and had hastened the delivery, as if Pat were going to New England by telegraph instead of by rail.

When twine is knotted around a package as that was it rarely gets untied. Not if there is a boy and a jack-knife as handy as there was just then.

The school-books were not very numerous, and they would not, alone, have made that thing so heavy.

Mr. Maguire glanced rapidly over the volumes as he picked them up.

"Latin. Little good there is in that unless ye're goin' to be a praste. Small chance for that, I'm thinkin'. Grake! Hiven be my rist! What does the loikes o' Pat Nolan want wid Grake? Av it was German, now. But there's not a sowl in this ward could buy a bar o' soap or a pound o' brown sugar in Grake. And this one's matthurmatics. That'll tache ye somethin'. They say there's a dale of it goes to the makin' of a first-rate politishen. And what's this? Chimisthry! The b'y'll be a-blowin' himsilf up some day wid sthame and gunpowdher. What have ye got there, Pat?"

Mrs. Maguire had contented herself with following the motions of her son.

Whatever book he laid his young hands on took all her interest so long as he held it.

How he would have liked to read them all at once!

So would she—with him.

“Oh, mother, look at them! He’s sent me the books I’m to study. God bless him! And he’s sent me these to read.”

“What are they, Pat?”

“Novels and history, mother. Ten big volumes of ’em! It’s little I know what they’re about; but the doctor must ha’ known.”

“I’ll be bound they’re good ones. Sure, an’ he’d niver send yez the wrong book. I’ll thrust him for that.”

Large, cheap editions they were, and the print was a trifle small, and the binding plain; but there was a wonderful amount of good reading in them, for all that.

Dr. Becker had been wise in his selections for Pat’s winter evenings in the country.

A little money can be made to go a great way, nowadays, if a man knows how to spend it.

That was Pat Nolan’s first library, and it was a capital beginning.

But the Maguire-Nolan household was not the

only one from which a boy was about to go away to school.

Sol Rogers had not only a father and mother, when he was at home, but such a "raft" of vigorous and active brothers and sisters that the vacancy made by his absence was not likely to be felt so keenly.

Perhaps not so much as his presence would have been, for Sol was a boy who was apt to be heard and felt wherever he might be.

Van Rivington, on the other hand, although he had no brother or sister, was seemingly much less inclined to create a disturbance.

In fact, one idea of his father's in sending him to Bunker Academy was that Van needed to be thrown out among the boys of his own age, and into a more rough-and-tumble sort of life than he had hitherto been accustomed to.

And yet Van had learned very well whatever the great city had to teach him, including lessons at the gymnasium, from the boxing and fencing school, the dancing-master, and others that "the country" could scarcely have given. Even his own father had very little idea how many things Van Rivington had picked up, for he was the

last boy in the world to make a vain parade of any one of them.

Those are often the very boys who learn most and best, and the time for them to show what they can do is absolutely sure to come to them.

Mr. Rivington was out on business of some sort. Sol Rogers was in the billiard-room, upstairs, knocking the ivory balls about in a vain attempt to catch some of the skill he had seen his more practiced cousin display. The whole house seemed more than usually silent, but there was one room, a large front chamber on the second floor, where the silence was broken from time to time by the faint rustle of a lady's dress.

A tall, sweet-faced, noble-looking lady, somewhat pale and wan, but with a beautiful light in her eyes just now. She was standing in front of a pier-glass, arranging a rose in her necktie.

"No more roses for me for a long time from Van," she muttered. "I shall miss them more than he can imagine. Poor fellow, how homesick he will be! He was never away from me before for so long a time."

How she did linger over that one little red rose!

It looked, too, as if she were trying to arrange something more than a rose. Her own feelings, for instance.

“He must not know I am ill. It would only worry him. I shall be well enough before he gets back. Dear Van! My splendid boy!”

One sentence at a time, at wide intervals. Word after word of motherly love and thoughtfulness. And then she slowly walked out of the chamber and down the stairs towards the back-parlor. How did she know where to find Van?

Well, she seemed to know, and to feel sure of finding him alone.

He was there, and she stood for a moment in the doorway looking at him.

There must have been something the matter with Van that morning, healthy and hearty as he looked.

There he sat, on the piano-stool, like a boy in a dream, not trying to play anything in particular, but aimlessly running his hands over the keys, now and then striking a chord or a few notes of some familiar melody, and then giving the whole thing a long rest as if he were thinking.

That is just what he was doing, and so busy was he with his thoughts that he did not hear the light step behind him, nor did he know but what he was alone until he felt a pair of wonderfully loving arms around his neck, and a soft voice murmured in his ear :

“Oh, Van, my boy ! my boy ! How I shall miss you !”

“Mother !”

“I’m not afraid, Van. God will care for you and bring you back to me. I shall trust you with Him.”

Poor Van ! What would he not have given, just then, to have known how to tell her just how he was feeling and what he was thinking !

Perhaps he did so that she understood him, for he leaned his young head back upon her shoulder, and his voice was thick and husky as he said :

“Mother ! Mother !”

Not another word, and all she said in reply, was :

“My dear boy !”

The next day was Wednesday, and a great day it was for those three boys. Everything else was forgotten in the bustle and excitement of getting away.

Mrs. Maguire cried a little every now and then, but Pat did all he could to comfort her.

"Oh, mother," he said, "what letters I'll write ye! They'll be long ones."

"Till me everything, Pat."

"Every mortal thing."

"Avvin av ye git yerself intil some scrape or other. Ye'll be sure to do that same, for ye're a b'y. Niver fear me. I'll sthand by yez, for good luck or bad."

"And so'll I," exclaimed Mr. Maguire, heartily. "I hope they'll give yez enough to ate. Learnin' is a foine thing, but what's the good of it wid stharvation? Take yer males regular, no matter what comes."

Pat looked as if he meant to do that very thing, and there was no doubt of his ability.

Still, he broke down at dinner that very day, and even his mother could not get him to eat as much as she thought good for him.

"Wid such a long journey to the fore."

To tell the truth, Van Rivington was having a similar difficulty, but Sol Rogers showed no signs of any defect in his appetite. He had been to school before, and then he was not leaving

home or mother just then, as the others were.

Just a little before two o'clock, Mr. Rivington's carriage drove up to the depot. All the baggage had been sent there hours before.

"There's Pat!" exclaimed Sol, as they sprang out.

"And that must be his mother with him," said Van.

"Where is his trunk, I wonder?" remarked Mr. Rivington.

It was there, however, for Mr. Maguire had brought it himself, in his own elegant grocer's cart, and a heavy piece of baggage it made, with Pat's clothes and all those books in it.

"My name's Maguire, sor, and I've married Pat's mother. It's proud we are of him."

"You've a right to be," said Mr. Rivington. "Better get that trunk checked right away."

"But the tickets!" exclaimed Pat. "Please tell me what to get."

"Oh, they're all provided. Van has them. Van, my boy, help Mr. Maguire get that trunk checked."

Van's good-bye to his mother had been said at

the house. He was sure he "could not have stood it" at the depot.

She was surer than he was, about her own part of it, but she managed to look as well and cheerful as she could, so her boy should have no idea what the parting cost her.

Perhaps he knew, for all that, in a dim, cloudy, boyish sort of way.

"Time, boys," said Mr. Rivington, as Van came back with Mr. Maguire. "You must hurry on board the train. Good-bye, Sol. Good-bye, Van. Let us hear from you right away. Your mother won't be easy till she gets a letter."

Van was about to say something, but just then Mrs. Maguire broke down in a passion of weeping, and grasped Pat Nolan with a most tremendous hug.

"Sure, sor, she's the mother of him," apologized Mr. Maguire, and that was quite enough.

In a minute more the three boys were in their railway seats ; in another the conductor shouted :

"All aboard !"

Then the engine was seized with a severe fit of coughing, the long train began to move, and Mrs.

Maguire turned sadly away to see her husband climb into his cart.

"He's gone, the b'y. He'll be a man some day. God save him."

Sol and Van had been on railway trains before, but every new ride is a new experience to boys of their age, and they were fast forgetting everything else as the cars got into swift motion.

Pat Nolan's whole life had been spent in the great city, and he felt as if he were leaving it all behind him.

That lasted only a few minutes, however, and then he began to feel as if he were plunging into a sort of new life, and a very wonderful one.

The beautiful palace-car in which they were seated occupied his busy eyes for a while. Then he studied the other passengers. There was not one of them he could not have described, or would not have known again if he had met him anywhere else, after that ten minutes of swift inspection.

Then he turned to the world that was passing so swiftly by outside the car-windows, and there was enough there to keep the eyes of any boy busy. Even Van and Sol stopped talking at last,

and began to stare through the great panes of glass at the villages, the fields, the trees, and the other things in what Sol Rogers called "the railway panorama."

"Mr. Rivington," began Pat at last.

"Not here," interrupted Van. "Did you think my father was coming to school with us? My name's Van."

"Mr. Van ——"

"Look here, Pat," exclaimed Sol Rogers, "that won't do. If I catch you calling me Mr. Rogers or Mr. Solomon, or any other hard name, it'll bring on a coolness. How would you like to be called Mr. Nolan?"

"Oh, but then ——" began Pat.

"Look out for your manners, then. Van isn't strong enough to carry a long handle yet."

"I like short names," said Pat.

"Couldn't shorten ours much," said Sol, "unless we cut 'em down to the letters."

"And how would that be?"

"Just P, S and V; not the big letters, but the little ones."

"Pat, Sol and Van'll do, I guess," said Van. "There's just one thing I'm thinking of, Sol."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to study hard at Bunker Academy, but I'm going to learn to swim, for all that."

"Can't you swim?" asked Pat.

"Not a stroke."

"Oh, but!" exclaimed Sol, "he can box and fence, and do no end of things. He can discount me at billiards, and sing and play the piano. He can do anything but swim and shoot. I can beat him there."

"I'll learn to shoot, too," said Van.

"But who'll set us up in the gun business?" said Sol. "I say, Pat, did you ever fish?"

"Off the docks, sometimes; but we never catch much there. It's just no fishing at all."

"I guessed it wasn't. I watched twenty boys and men one day for an hour, and they didn't pull up a fish amongst them all. We'll show you something better'n that."

"But how about hooks and lines?"

"Get 'em in Bunkerville. None o' your fancy fixings. Just hooks and lines to catch fish with."

"And guns?"

"That's a problem. It takes money to buy guns. We must look out about that."

"Do they let you hunt?"

"Will they let us? Patrick, I'm ashamed of you. Brought up in a free city, too. You wait till we get there. We'll show you."

"I'm almost as green as Pat is," said Van. "I'm glad we're all going to board in the same house."

"Pat," said Sol, "do you know anything about poor little Mrs. Porrance?"

"Nothing. Only I'm to live there."

"You must be kind to her, Patrick. If I catch you ill-treating her in any way ——"

And Sol looked unutterable things as he spoke for the future well-being of his beloved landlady.

Van said nothing, but he nodded approval in a way that gave Pat a high idea of their joint regard for "poor little Mrs. Porrance." He determined that they should have no good cause to complain of him.

Unkind to a woman, indeed? He?

A defenseless widow, at that?

Pat thought of his own mother, and felt half indignant.

Then he thought of Mr. Maguire, and won-

dered if there was any probability that Mrs. Porrance would marry again.

Van seemed disposed to be somewhat quiet, but Sol Rogers had made a fair beginning, and there was now no stopping him. He had an inexhaustible fund of things to tell about Bunkerville, and of advice to give about their joint operations after they got there.

Pat listened with all the ears he had, and it was all interesting, but now and then he turned his keen eyes from the merry, animated face of Sol Rogers to the very pleasant but resolute countenance of Van Rivington, as if he were studying which of those two, after all, had more in him.

Pat Nolan was not the only one in the world that is doing that thing.

It is not always easy to tell, on short acquaintance, which man we had better set out to follow.

By and by they had to change to another road, and this time they found themselves in a sleeping-car.

That was a wonderful experience for Pat Nolan, and he was half astonished in the morn-

ing to find that he had really been asleep for several hours. He was hungry enough to eat a most satisfactory breakfast, however, when the time for it came, nor could he understand why some of his older fellow-passengers abused that meal as they did.

If they could only have gone at it with Pat Nolan's appetite!

The railway ride grew tedious as the day went by, and all three of the boys were glad enough, about the middle of the afternoon, when it came to an end, and they and their trunks were deposited on the platform of a "way-station."

"This is not Bunkerville, Sol?"

Pat had got both the other names handy enough by this time.

"No, indeed. They did think of having it moved over here when the railway was built, but the hills were in the way. Besides, it would have cost ——"

"How much would it have cost?" asked Van, as Sol hesitated.

"More than the stage does, horses and all. Here it comes. Now, boys, for two or three hours of bouncing."

It was a genuine, old-fashioned stage-coach, and neither Van nor Pat had ever seen the like of it before, but they enjoyed it, and the grand ride in it across country, none the less on that account.

All the way Sol Rogers amused himself with pointing out to his friends various objects of interest near and far, including the mountains that were now becoming visible against the horizon.

He had not completed, moreover, his instructions to Pat Nolan.

"Look out, Pat," he said, "when you first see Dr. Betts, you mustn't laugh at him."

"Laugh at him? What for should I do that?"

"Oh, he's such a dwarf, you know, and he's sensitive about his size. Nothing makes him madder than to be laughed at. You'll be careful?"

"'Deed and I will. I don't feel much like laughing at anybody."

"You don't mean to say you're tired?"

"I am, then."

"Tired? With this bit of a ride? How'll you ever stand it, Pat, working all day for little

Mrs. Porrance, and then studying Greek and Latin all night?"

"All night? Did you ever study all night?"

"I can't say I ever did at any one time. But you wait and see. There's great times before you."

So there were, indeed, and among them plenty of work for Mrs. Porrance and all the hard study one Irish boy need have asked for.

CHAPTER III

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH MRS. PORRANCE

A COMFORTABLE, well-built, but somewhat rambling house was that of Mrs. Porrance. It was built of wood, as were most of the houses in Bunkerville, and was surrounded by great maple-trees that shaded it well in summer. It stood back from the road, but the lights from the windows of the long dining-room in the western wing lit up the grass and shrubbery that evening to the very fence.

“The stage-coach is very late, Almira. I hope nothing has happened.”

“With all those boys on board! They’d be enough to make sure of an accident, if they’re anything like Mrs. Hinckley’s. I’m so glad we’re not to have them.”

A reasonably good-looking girl was Almira Porrance, tall and fresh-complexioned, but with a somewhat discontented expression of countenance.

She wore her flaxen hair in curls innumerable, and every curl of them had been turned in that precise manner ever since a poetical description of them had been printed years ago, in the "Poet's Corner" of the Bunkerville *Clarion*.

Almira was a girl of spirit, too, and she had long since discovered that Bunkerville was a small place, and the valley it stood in a very narrow and hollow sort of an affair.

Nevertheless, she was almost as deeply interested as her mother, that evening, in the expected arrivals, and she had more than once expressed a hope that "the two other boys would be something of an improvement on Sol Rogers."

"To be sure," she said, "I would not compare Sol with the Hinckley boys; but, then, he has no reverence whatever, and you never know when to believe him."

"Sol is a pretty good sort of a boy," replied her mother, "and I mean to keep a steady hand on him this fall and winter. I'm most anxious about that wild Irish boy."

"We must make him know his place," said Almira, stiffly.

"He'll find it soon enough."

Just then a long "toot" of a tin stage-horn came up the street. Then a rattle of wheels and a trampling of horses' feet ceased suddenly at the front gate, and they heard the cheery voice of Sol Rogers sing out :

"Here we are, boys! This is the place, Van! Now, Pat, remember all I told you!"

"He's a smart boy if he can do that," muttered Almira, and she was right to the last inch.

The boys were out in a twinkling, all three of them, and their trunks and parcels followed them to the sidewalk. There was plenty of help handy to carry the things in, and all the boys had to do was to open the gate and march up to the front door, where Mrs. Porrance and her tall daughter were dignifiedly awaiting them.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Porrance?" almost shouted Sol Rogers. "How d'ye do, Miss Almira? This is my cousin, Van Rivington, Mrs. Porrance, and this is Mr. Patrick Nolan."

"Glad to see you, Sol. Glad to see you, Mr. Rivington," returned the portly matron. "How do you do, Patrick? I'm glad to see you, too. Walk right in. The men'll take your trunks to

your rooms. Come in where it's lighter, so I can have a good look at you."

"Poor little Mrs. Porrance," thought Pat, as he recalled Sol's description of her. "Troth, and she'll not be picked up and run away wid. What lies he's been telling!"

His first impression was more than confirmed when they got into the dining-room; and his new landlady, not to call her his new mistress, put both her strong hands on his shoulders and looked him squarely in the face.

Almira was just then whispering to Sol Rogers:

"How dreadfully red his hair is!" and Sol was replying:

"It isn't that color in the daytime. It's only so after dark and when he's hungry. He's pretty near starved now, and so are Van and I. That's what's the matter with his hair."

But, if that was the case, what could have been the matter with Mrs. Porrance, as she, too, noted the extreme brilliancy of Pat Nolan's "wig"?

She seemed to grow several shades paler as she looked at him, and the hard lines about her mouth settled more rigidly than ever.

"It's all right, Patrick," she said, in a few seconds. "I'm glad Mr. Rivington sent you to me. We will talk it over by and by. Just now you will all want your suppers. Van, Sol will show you to your room. Almira, tell Patrick where to go. Your faces are all very dirty."

Van Rivington had never heard the truth more plainly spoken in his life, and it was half refreshing, considering the yarns he had been listening to all day from Sol Rogers.

There was no doubt but what their faces needed washing and their clothes brushing. The room, too, to which Sol piloted Van was a large one, looking out on the garden in the rear of the house, over the sloping roof of a sort of "lean-to," or back addition.

Almira merely said :

"Come, Pat. This way."

And Pat followed her without a word, for the whole thing was a good deal bewildering to a "green boy from the city."

A small room, with a small, rusty stove, a narrow bed, a closet for clothes that was half as big as the room ; but it was as good as anything Pat

Nolan had ever been accustomed to, and it seemed to him a sort of magnificence.

Almira said :

“This is your room, Pat,” and left him to himself.

“Poor little Mrs. Porrance !” soliloquized Pat, as he made his way toward the corner where they had deposited his trunk. “I hope she won’t eat me up. Miss Almira’s not likely to do that same.”

His quick instinct had already taught him that he had, somehow, found no favor with “the daughter of the house.”

“Mother,” said Almira, on her return to the dining-room, “what a handsome fellow that young Mr. Rivington is! He looks like a perfect gentleman. But what will we do with that red-headed Irish boy ?”

“Do you think Van is handsomer than Pat ? Well, he won’t be so useful to us. You may have Pat, now and then, to see you home from the mite society.”

“I think I see myself ! But I don’t believe they’ll be long in getting ready for supper.”

Almira was often correct in her calculations, and this was one of the cases.

When the boys were all seated at the supper-table, Pat and Van were half surprised to find how very few questions of any kind Mrs. Porrance had to ask, and what a torrent of them came from Almira; but it is not unlikely that the widow's keen eyes learned as much as did her daughter's inquisitive tongue.

The questions were mainly addressed to Sol and Van, however, and Pat had little to do except to look and listen and eat. So he did all three to the very best of his ability.

They all three worked well and steadily, however, so that supper came to an end before a great while, and then Sol Rogers sprang to his feet, exclaiming :

"Now, boys, for a raid on the village. I must show you how Bunkerville looks by moonlight."

"Just the thing," said Van.

"I think so," remarked Mrs. Porrance. "Patrick, you may go with them this time. When you get back I shall want you to carry some wood into the kitchen."

So very quietly and firmly she said it, the strong-faced woman, and Pat felt in every bone in his body that his position in that house had

been settled for him. He scarcely knew how completely he had become "a member of Mrs. Porrance's family," or how much she was in the habit of being absolutely obeyed.

He got his hat and set out with the boys, and scarcely had they passed the gate before Sol Rogers turned upon him, with :

"Now, Pat, you'll be kind to poor Mrs. Porrance, won't you? Poor thing! You'll never abuse her?"

"If he does," added Van, "and she needs any help, I'm the man. It'll never do, Pat. Be good to her."

It was the first time Pat had laughed since the stage rolled into Bunkerville, and it did him good.

There was plenty of fun in the idea of the Widow Porrance being protected from him by those two boys—or by anybody else.

Still, he thought about that wood-carrying business, and he wondered how much wood there was likely to be in his academy experiences.

At that moment they were crossing the first street corner beyond the widow's house, and something came buzzing between Sol's head and

Van's, while something else struck solidly upon Pat's ribs.

"The village boys!" exclaimed Sol. "I reckoned they'd be on the lookout for us. Won't we pay 'em up, though?"

"Hullo," sang out a voice from the shadows on the other side of the street.

"Come to the 'cademy, have ye?" and another brace of apples came buzzing by.

"Answer 'em in French, Van," said Sol. "That'll puzzle 'em. Don't I wish I knew some lingo! Pat, can you speak Irish? Let 'em have it, if you can."

Van was ready, and his first sentence was scarcely out of his mouth before another voice shouted:

"I say, they're foreigners. Give 'em some more apples."

More apples it was, and Pat put in all the wild Irish sentences he could think of.

"Hear that!" shouted one of the village boys. "If it doesn't sound like old Bett's Greek."

Then Pat dropped suddenly off into the most abusive German he could think of, for a hard apple took him on the calf of his left leg, and he

did not know enough of Erse to express his feelings.

"What a lot of foreigners!" yelled one of the villagers. "Boys, let's go over and take a look at them. Hold on with your apples."

The three friends, however, had been picking up the flying fruit, and the moment a squad of boys, double their number, but about their own size, had half crossed the street, all close together, so that they made a good mark even in that dim light, Sol whispered:

"Now, boys, let drive. Give it to 'em. They're a cowardly lot."

Cowardly or not, they got nearly a dozen of hard apples, at very short range, while Sol shouted:

"Honesty's the best policy. We don't want any apples that don't belong to us. Take 'em, and keep 'em."

"I say, fellers, that there's Sol Rogers. I know his voice. Now's our time to lick him. Come on."

Scarcely, however, had the speaker said "come on," before a fall pippin, thrown by Pat Nolan, struck him just below the waistband, and with a

loud "O-o-o-o-o!" the would-be assailant limped away across the road, with both hands on his stomach, followed by his friends.

"Sol," said Van, "are all the village boys like that?"

"No, indeed they ain't. Some of 'em are real good fellows. Can shoot and fish and play ball like anything. These are just the loafers. Glad that chap got that big apple just where he did. He doesn't want any more apples to-night."

"I guess not," said Van, who had distinguished himself by the correctness and force with which he had thrown his part of the pippins.

"There's regular war," continued Sol, "between the academy boys and the village boys. It'd be worse if some of the villagers didn't go to the academy. Then, too, the boarding around gets us sort of acquainted."

"Do you have any fights?" asked Pat.

"Sometimes, but not very bad ones. The worst we have are among ourselves. We've got some awful mean chaps."

"Do you know 'em?"

"Some of 'em. There's the two Hinckleys, Bob and Joe. They were too much for me last

year. They've got a regular crowd, and I didn't have any."

"We three ain't a crowd," said Pat.

"We're a powerful good beginning of one, then. All you want is a good start and the rest is sure to come. Here we are. That's the green."

"How many churches!"

"Yes, all sorts, but that big white one, next the middle of the green, is the academy. It's twice as big as any of the rest."

"So it is. But what does an academy want of a steeple?" asked Van.

"To put a bell in it. It rings every morning at quarter before nine, and you've got to be inside the chapel by nine or you get a black mark."

"We won't have far to go."

"No, not unless we've been fishing that morning. Sometimes it isn't easy to finish a game of ball just in time. You ask Dr. Betts if it is."

"Where does he live?"

"Up at the other end of the village. He can't fish or play ball, so he's always on hand in time. He's a real good little fellow."

Bunkerville was a very pretty sort of place, and it looked well by moonlight.

Sol pointed out its notable features one by one, and Pat and Van thought they had never been in anything nicer. Just now, however, they were beginning to feel the effects of their journey.

"It isn't so much that I'm tired," said Sol, as he led the way back, "as that I want to set you two a good example."

"That's kind of you," replied Van.

"And I've got my wood to carry in," dolefully remarked Pat Nolan.

"I say, Pat," exclaimed Sol, "she's come down on you rather sudden. Why couldn't she let you off the first night? I say it's rough. I'd tell her so if I wasn't afraid of hurting her feelings."

"Poor thing!" mockingly responded Pat. "But I guess I'll live through it."

Mrs. Porrance was waiting for them, but Almira had gone into a neighbor's house for a chat and to tell about the new boys.

Sol and Van went to their rooms at once, but Pat followed his mistress as she led the way into the kitchen.

"The wood-pile's in the back yard. Here's the

wood-box. Soon as you've filled that you can go to bed. Do you know how to light a fire?"

"Not with wood. We use coal in the city. Is it harder to do?"

"I'll come down to-morrow morning and show you. After that, you must attend to it yourself. You are to earn just one half your board. That's my agreement with Mr. Rivington. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. I guess I can do that easy enough."

"We'll see. Is your mother living?"

"Yes, ma'am. Her name's Maguire."

"Oh, she's married again. Well, it's none of my business. I never meddle with what doesn't concern me. Did you ever go to school much?"

"The city public schools."

"You can read, then?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And write and cipher?"

"Yes, ma'am. I learned all they tried to teach me."

"But you don't know Greek and Latin?"

"No, ma'am; but we had a good many other things instead of them."

"Then you'll have to study hard, that's all I've got to say. But I'm glad you can read and write."

There were not many boys in Bunker Academy who could have beaten Pat Nolan in either one; but he did not feel like boasting with that somewhat grim-visaged woman looking down in his face, and he hurried out to the wood-pile.

His task was by no means a hard one to begin with. Nothing like so hard as carrying home heavy baskets of clean clothes, as he had so often had to do.

Pat was very much inclined to be satisfied with his prospects, but he had yet to learn the entire meaning of a wood-pile. It is one thing in warm, September weather, and it is quite another about Christmas, and from that time forward.

The Fall term of Bunker Academy was to begin on the following Monday, and nearly all the scholars—"students" they called themselves—from a distance were already on hand. As fast as they arrived they were expected to report themselves to Dr. Betts, to be duly enrolled on

the books. The doctor spent every forenoon at the academy chapel for that purpose, and Sol Rogers led his two friends across the green the next morning, a little after nine o'clock.

Pat Nolan had already learned how to make a "wood-fire," for he had been up since before daybreak, and he was in very good spirits, in spite of the ordeal before him. In fact, it was not easy to keep down Pat Nolan's spirits for any great length of time.

"Now, Pat, remember," said Sol, as they were about to enter, "you must be careful not to laugh at little Dr. Betts."

Pat thought of "poor Mrs. Porrance," and a broad grin was spreading across his face just as he caught sight of the tremendous proportions of the academy "principal," towering behind a book-strewn table at the further end of the not very extensive "chapel."

The seats were arranged in rows, each a little higher than the one in front of it, so that when they were full the boys and girls, or "young lady and young gentleman students," were all in full view from the doctor's desk.

A very tall and a very large man was he, and

he caught the mocking smile on Pat Nolan's face.

"Ah-ha, got another of that sort!" he said to himself. "Guess I must put that fellow through a bit of an examination. He needs taking down."

Very stern and dignified, therefore, was the doctor's greeting, even after he informed Patrick that he had received a letter concerning him from his friend, Mr. Rivington.

"You, Master Rogers, will go right on in your classes. Here is your list for Monday. Master Rivington's is the same as your own for the present. I may make some changes for him after a week or so. Master Nolan, I must examine you before I can tell where to put you."

There had been several others in the room when the three boys entered, and more were coming in, so that poor Pat had quite an audience around him when his trial began.

Still, it was not so terrible a thing as the doctor imagined for a New York public school boy.

"Read that, sir. Read it aloud."

Pat read it, clearly and well, in spite of the

mellow brogue that belonged to him, and the doctor remarked :

“Very well, my boy ; very well. One more example. Read that.”

But the doctor’s attention had been half way diverted by the entrance of several newcomers, and he handed Pat, by mistake, a German reader.

Pat could talk that language better than read it, but he plunged ahead.

“Hold on, sir. That’s the wrong book. Never mind. Can you give me the meaning of it?”

“I can spoil it for yez in English,” blundered poor Pat.

“Do it, then.”

And he did it, and came so far from spoiling it that the worthy doctor muttered :

“Nothing but a public school education, eh ? Wonder if he knows French ?”

“Only a little, sir. Not enough to read it. I can just speak it a little.”

“Ahem ! That’s all, eh ? Well, let’s see about your mathematics.”

So he did, and Pat “spoiled” one example after another in a way that set the doctor to

probing him on algebra and geometry. Pat was perfect in everything belonging to the "grades" he had passed through, and it was the same with his geography and his grammar.

"Oh!" exclaimed the doctor, "I quite forgot. Your Greek and Latin?"

"Never touched my tongue to ayther one of 'em," groaned Pat.

"I declare, then, I'm glad of it. You'll have plenty of time to give them. Strange that a boy should learn all that in a mere city public school. He could scarcely have done much better in Bunker Academy. Must be an uncommonly bright boy."

Little did the "principal" know about city public schools; but he had a clearer idea before he finished his acquaintance with Pat Nolan.

All honor to our thoroughgoing "people's academies," and may they keep on improving, for there's plenty of room for it yet.

"That will do, sir," added Dr. Betts to Pat. "There is your Greek and Latin list for Monday. I will see about your other branches. You may all go now."

"Pat!" exclaimed Sol, as soon as they were

out on the green, "did I not tell you to be good to Dr. Betts?"

"And what then?"

"Here you've been and puzzled the poor little fellow, the very first morning. He doesn't know what to make of you at all. No more do I. Did you ever catch a woodchuck?"

"Never a one. What's a woodchuck?"

"Don't you know? I wish Dr. Betts had remembered to ask you that."

"What is it, anyway?"

"Well, if I tell you, then you'll know. It's a dreadful savage beast. We'll go for some one of these days; after we get our guns. It would never do to go for woodchucks till you're well armed."

Pat determined to hunt up some better information on the woodchuck question before the subject came up again, but just then Sol exclaimed:

"There go Bob and Joe Hinckley, as big and ugly as ever. Ain't I glad they don't board in the same house with me this term!"

"Did they, ever?" asked Van.

"All last winter, and a fine time they gave

me. I don't know what I'd have done if it hadn't been for Mrs. Porrance. They were a deal more afraid of her than they were of me."

Pat thought it quite likely, for the two Hinckley boys were, either of them, half a head taller than Van himself.

They looked pretty strong, too, but there was a sort of a clumsy slouch in their gait which was very different from the erect, firm, graceful carriage of that young gentleman.

At that very moment they were discussing Sol and his new friends.

"He and the red-headed fellow are about of a size," remarked Bob, with a vicious snap of his black eyes.

"Yes," returned Joe; "that's the Irish fellow that's to do Mother Porrance's chores for her. He isn't much. The other chap's taller."

"Sort of a city dandy. May be good at his books. Guess he won't amount to a great deal at anything else."

"We'll get his measure. Either one of us could clean out all three of 'em."

But Sol Rogers was saying, at that very moment:

"Boys, let's go back and get our trunks open. You and I mustn't neglect our practice, Van."

"All right," said Van.

"I opened my trunk last night," said Pat, "and all my books are out and my clothes hung up in the closet. Mrs. Porrance said this morning she'd take care of my shirts and collars for me. That was kind of her."

"Did she? Well, she's a good sort of a woman if you can keep on the right side of her. There's about half the folks in Bunkerville don't know exactly how to do it. So much the worse for them."

"I guess so," remarked Van.

Back to the house they went, and their first visit was to Pat's little room.

"All those books yours?" exclaimed Sol. "I declare, what lots and lots of good reading! Enough for all winter if you don't read too much. I'll let you read all my Greek and Latin for me, if you'll lend me one of those books of novels."

"Somebody's borrowed one of 'em already," remarked Pat, with an expression of anxiety on his face.

"Oh, never mind that," said Sol. "I saw that

sweet girl, Almira Porrance, reading something by the dining-room window as we came in. It must be her. She's death on novels."

"I don't mind if she is," said Pat, "so the books stay in the house."

"Look out for her, then. The Bunkerville girls are awful borrowers."

"Are they? Had I better lock up my books?"

"By no means, now they know you've got 'em. Your life wouldn't be safe. But don't ever lend anything to little Dr. Betts. He borrowed a leaden cannon of me once, and I never saw it again. He doesn't seem to use it much, either, that I can hear of."

"Afraid of blowing himself up, perhaps," laughed Van.

"Well, yes. I forgot to say the rascally thing had burst twice before he got hold of it," drawled Sol. "Now come on into our room and we'll attend to our duties."

Pat Nolan was not without some natural boyish curiosity, and his friends had plenty of things to show him.

More books than he had, three to one, besides

their school-books, and Sol said he had more to come, in a box that was to be sent him from home; but a more thorough examination of their treasures came to an end for the time when Van Rivington dragged from the depths of one of his trunks a handsome pair of boxing-gloves.

"Those are the beauties for me!" exclaimed Sol. "Can you use them, Pat?"

"A little. But I never had much practice."

"Van has, then. It's just lovely to see him box. He's teaching me, and you'd better let him give you a lesson now and then. Boxing is a wonderful thing in a world like this, where so many of the boys are bigger than you are."

"And where they know it so well," added Van. "Come, Sol, on with 'em."

He was indeed a capital boxer for his size, alert, strong-armed, and as quick as a flash. Sol was no sort of a match for him, although he was evidently picking up the science pretty fast.

"You could make it interesting for a green-horn, now," said Van, as Sol drew back, out of breath. "Pat, will you put on the gloves?"

“I’m no match for you, but I’d like to learn. I’ll try a little.”

No match, indeed. Not many boys of Van’s size, or larger, were likely to be that. But Van complimented Pat on promising to become “an uncommonly hard hitter,” his arms were so strong, and he was so firm and steady on his feet.

“Our crowd won’t be laughed at after a while,” remarked Sol; “but we mustn’t get into any scrapes if we can help it. Little Dr. Betts is dreadfully down on all that sort of thing.”

Pat remembered some of his own past experiences among the rough-and-ready street-boys of the great city, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He had come to Bunkerville for an education, and he meant to stick to his purpose faithfully.

Still, no man, young or old, can be quite sure of what the future may have in store for him.

It was nearly dinner-time now, and Mrs. Porrance’s voice came up the stairs, clear as a bell:

“Patrick, I want you!”

“More wood,” said Sol. “But, then, it’s that they cook the dinner with.”

IV

VAN LEARNS TO SWIM

"WE had one very remarkable boy come in to-day," remarked Dr. Betts to his wife, as they sat down to dinner.

"What sort of boy?"

"Irish. The one Mr. Rivington wrote me about. The reddest hair you ever saw. He's had nothing but a mere public school education, and yet he's so well ahead in some branches that I scarcely know where to put him."

"How old is he?"

"Fourteen. Strong and hearty. Got the making of a man in him. It is not often I get so deeply interested in a new boy."

"Did not Mr. Rivington say he was very poor?"

"Poor, but not very. He is quite well clad, though plainly. Well as most of our farmer boys. He is to work out part of his board at Mrs. Porrance's."

"That's not uncommon. Some boys do that with fathers that are well able to pay their way."

"It doesn't hurt 'em. Sometimes I think it helps to keep them out of mischief. This boy looks as if there might be plenty of fun in him."

"Not a bad boy?"

"No, but not the sort of boy the rest had better pick out to play tricks on."

"What sort of boy is Mr. Rivington's own son?"

"I don't quite know what to make of him. He didn't say three words. He looks bright enough. He's a little taller than Sol Rogers, and a hundred times better-looking."

"But, then, doctor, you would scarcely call Sol a beauty."

Sol himself had often complained that his features were but little appreciated. What would he have thought if he had heard Mrs. Betts make that very unfeeling remark?

Poor Sol! It was well for him that his wits promised to do better things for his fortune than his face was ever likely to.

Dr. Betts understood him, however, and

thought a good deal of him, in spite of the somewhat troublesome nature of some of his last year's adventures.

That was more than Mrs. Porrance could yet say of Pat Nolan, or he of her.

"He's a strong, willing fellow," she remarked to Almira.

"We'll get lots of work out of him," responded the young lady, "but we must see to it that he does not get behind in his studies."

"He's at them now, up-stairs."

That was after dinner.

The other boys went out for a tour of exploration through the village, Sol, particularly, being anxious to know "How many of last year's boys had come back again."

It was not long before he declared:

"I say, Van, Bob and Joe Hinckley'll have pretty much all their old crowd. As mean as ever. They're the biggest and meanest of the lot, though. There aren't many ugly things they are not up to. We'll have trouble with them, you see if we don't."

But Pat had not felt like going out with them. He scarcely felt at home with them, as yet, in

spite of the hearty equality with which they treated him.

Besides, he was tremendously anxious about his Greek and Latin. Terribly hard and mysterious tongues they seemed, as he sat and stared at his first lessons. He was half way astonished when he found, before the afternoon was over, and Mrs. Porrance called him down-stairs, that he could repeat, from end to end, the not very difficult tasks assigned to him for the first day.

"I'll go right on wid 'em to-morrow," he said to himself. "I can say that cruked Grake alphabet already. Sure and thim letters are aisier than German, any day."

So they were, and as for the Latin, he was almost beginning to lose his reverence for it.

"Can you milk?" asked Mrs. Porrance, as Pat threw down a great armful of wood into the wood-box.

"Milk, is it? Sure it's little of that sort of work we get in the city."

"Well, I do not think I shall keep a cow at the house this season. I've rented my farm. But I mean to have my pony team sent over in a day or two. It will be part of your work to

take care of them. You'll have the chickens to feed some of the time."

"Is it horses, ma'am? 'Deed and I'd be glad of that. I'd soon learn to drive 'em."

"Do you like horses?"

"Don't I, then? Only I never had anything to do wid 'em."

"You'll have plenty. To-morrow I shall need you pretty much all day. You must stay at home this evening. I shall not want you to go out often after supper. Boys that do are sure to get into mischief."

Pat's life had been rather a free one up to this time, and it was something new to him to be told, especially by another woman than his own mother, what he must do with his time.

There was something in Mrs. Porrance's face, however, which forbade any remonstrance, and Pat was silent, but he hurried out for another armful of wood.

That evening Sol and Van invited him into their room, and he carried his Greek "Introduction" with him, but he did not find them at their lessons.

"We're going a-fishing, to-morrow," remarked

Sol, as he pointed to a pair of very decent-looking jointed rods that lay on the bed. "Saturday's the day for that. I'm to give young Rivington a lesson in swimming, too. It's his father's particular orders. You'll come with us, of course?"

"No, Sol, I'm tied to the house," said Pat, somewhat dolefully. "Sorra one of me knows what it's for, but there's work to the fore."

"Work? On Saturday? Did the Porrance woman say that? I never heard the like. What won't she do next? Patrick, I must see little Dr. Betts about that."

"I must stay, though."

"No help for it. Look at that hook, now, and that line. Don't feel bad about it. Your turn'll come—that is, if Van and I don't use up all the angle worms and catch all the fish."

"We'll try and leave some for Pat," laughed Van. "Have you looked at your lessons, Pat?"

"'Deed and I have."

"Patrick," exclaimed Sol, "I'd forgotten my duties. Let me hear you say them. Don't squirm now, as I often remark to the worms; it'll do you good. Fetch on your books."

True enough, Sol and Van had been talking the matter over, and they had decided to volunteer as special tutors for Pat's benefit.

Anything better could scarcely have happened to him, and they little knew what a grand thing it was likely to be for themselves. If you want to learn more about anything than you ever knew before, try to teach it to somebody else.

It's one way of finding out how little you know.

Pat's first recitation in the "dead languages," therefore, was to his two young friends, and they were in shouts of enthusiasm over the way he did it.

"I've done the next one," said Pat.

"Two in a day!" exclaimed Sol. "Do you hear that, Van? The young man from Ireland and the Fourth Ward has knocked over two lessons. We'll have to tie him up. Pat, let's hear them."

Hear the second they did, and Van became talkative over such rare proficiency.

"Go ahead, Pat; there's no telling where you'll bring up. What you want to do is to get out of the lower class. You rate as high as

either of us in everything else. If Dr. Betts isn't a fool he'll be glad of it."

"Dr. Betts a fool? Did I hear you correctly?" said Sol. "No, no, Van, my boy. I've been with him too long for that. The little man is no fool. I don't just now call to mind anything I think you could teach him, unless it might be billiards. Do you know I'm not half sure he can't box?"

"I shan't try him," said Van. "He's too long in the reach."

"And he fills his belt just a little too full for you or me. But he's no fool, Van, the doctor isn't."

That was the impression received by most boys after a term or two at Bunker Academy.

Before bedtime all sorts of tackle were in readiness for the next day's fishing, and Pat had laid aside his lessons for a peep at one of Dr. Becker's presents.

"Mrs. Porrance," said Sol Rogers, at the breakfast-table next morning, "cold sausages are excellent."

"Are they?"

"The finest fruit I know of. Just the thing for a lunch."

"No doubt of it."

"Can we have some?"

"What for?"

"Mr. Van Rensselaer Rivington, of New York, this young man here and myself, are going out into the wilderness for some fish."

"Are you? Well, I suppose I must put you up some lunch. Cold sausages are as good as anything. Almira, fry two more."

"Two, Mrs. Porrance? Or did I hear you say two dozen?"

"Two, Sol. I saw you in the garden digging your bait, and I fried what I thought would be enough, but you and Van have both eaten more than I expected. Pat has fallen off a little, but not enough to make up."

Van looked at her in astonishment, but there was not so much as a twinkle in her steady brown eyes.

No, it could not be possible that Mrs. Porrance had any fun in her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Porrance," said Sol. "We will bring you some fish."

"Wish I were sure of it. Remember how you disappointed me two or three times last fall?"

"That was because we went in swimming before we tried our hooks and lines. We mean to have a swim this time, but we'll catch our fish first."

"If you catch them," said Miss Almira, doubtfully.

"Catch them? Pat, my boy, you've no idea what you're missing. You must let him go some day, Mrs. Porrance."

"Perhaps I will. Some day when I really need some fish."

It was clear that she had small faith in the skill of Sol Rogers, but it was not till they were fairly on the way that Van Rivington heard the truth of the matter.

"It wasn't that we didn't catch fish enough, Van, but I didn't always bring 'em home. It went against my grain to see those two Hinckley boys gorging themselves with fish of my catching. It seemed such a waste of the fish."

"But they had to eat, I suppose?"

"Well, Mother Porrance was not running her

table very high, just then, and fresh fish were too good a variation. I'm not spiteful, but I have my preferences. I'd rather feed some folks than some others."

"But you missed it yourself?"

"Not quite. I got invited out three times to help eat my own fish, and there was hot mince pie, too, every time. If you ever give away any fish, Van, give 'em to folks that make good mince pies. There's profit in it."

Sol looked as wise as an owl when he said that, and Van was compelled to admit that there might be something in it.

Sol had told Van the tramp would be a sharp one to the little lake among the hills which he had selected for their afternoon's sport, but it was every inch as long a walk as Van had counted on. Sol seemed inclined to hurry the matter, too, and long before they got there both of them were contented to trudge along in silence.

"It's a pretty place," said Van, as he looked across what seemed a mere pond of scarcely a dozen acres, on two sides of which the green pasture-land sloped to the water's edge, while

the other two were steep, rocky, and thickly grown with trees and bushes.

"It *is* a pretty place. Are there many fish here?"

"Sometimes. Then again you might fish all day and not get a bite. Our best place is over yonder, between those two stumps. I hope it hasn't been all fished out."

A nice, shady place was the one Sol pointed to, and they pushed for it eagerly.

"Silence!" whispered Sol; "I mustn't let the fish know I'm here."

"How about me?"

"You, too. They're always shy of strangers. The less talk the more fish. There's the bait; throw in as soon as you're ready."

If there is one thing in the wide world that is dull and prosy to all but the very persons who are doing it, it is putting worms on hooks and catching fish with them. Even when the "luck" is fairly good, as it was in this case, there is no such thing as getting excited about it.

"Pumpkin-seed," said Sol, as Van pulled up one. "First bite for you, best luck for me. Here it comes. I've got him. Hello, if it isn't a bullhead!"

"Better'n nothing."

"Would be if he were bigger."

"I've another bite. Ho!" and Van very neatly landed a half-pound perch. Sol followed soon with a second bullhead, and then there was a pause.

"I must whistle for them," began Sol, when his float suddenly went under, and his slender rod bent savagely with the stroke of something stronger than perch or sunfish.

"Play him!" exclaimed Van. "He's a big one. He'll break your line."

"No, he won't. He's a pickerel. I know him. It's more his temper than his weight. I'll bring him in."

Sol showed a very decent degree of skill, however, in the way he humored and teased that fish, and he was a proud boy when he drew him to land, for his tackle was by no means strong, and the pickerel must have weighed a pound and a half.

Meantime, Van had pulled in two more good-sized "pumpkin-seeds," or sunfish, and it looked as if their day was likely to be a good one.

"Splendid beginning," said Sol; "but it's too

good to last. We must work hard while it does."

"Why, will it end early?"

"Always does with me. It works that way even at dinner. No matter how hungry I am when I sit down, I can't keep it up. Half the time I'm used up when they bring in the pie — There, I've got another pickerel, only he isn't so big. I can fetch him right in."

The sport was really very good, and before noon the two boys had laid in a string of fish of various sorts and sizes, which, as Sol expressed it, "Was calculated to encourage Mrs. Porrance on the fish question."

"They'll weigh something, too, before we get 'em home," remarked Van, who was thinking of the long walk.

"I reckon they will. Anyhow, let's have lunch and a swim. Then we can loaf around in the woods a while, and return to Bunkerville."

"I'll do the loafing and you carry home the fish."

"No, we'll eat all the lunch and put them in the basket. Hullo, what's become of the sausages?"

Sol had pulled in his line as he talked, and was now bending over what seemed to be a mere piece of empty wickerwork.

"The sausages? Sol, have you been mean enough to eat them all?"

"How could we have lost them?"

"Lost them? No, Sol, you can't play that game on me. There's one sticking out of your vest-pocket."

And Van, even as he spoke, began to pull, or seem to pull, cold sausages out of his cousin's pockets, hair, mouth, and even out of his left eye.

"Splendid!" shouted Sol. "I remember it all now. But how you have improved! Old Blitz himself couldn't do it much better. We must keep it a secret, though. Have you learned any other tricks?"

"Piles of 'em. It's wonderfully easy after you get a start."

"I never could get a start. I couldn't pull a sausage out of my own mouth, let alone any other fellow's. Let's put some in, though. I can do that to perfection."

When lunch was over, Sol remarked:

"It's against rules to go in swimming just after eating. Let's fish a while and then try it."

That was wise, but it was just as he prophesied in the morning. Their luck had left them, and not so much as a "shiner" did they add to their basket of fish. There would have been room for some, too, for the last sausage was gone, with every atom of other food provided for them by Mrs. Porrance. Much as she knew about boys, she had not overestimated their appetites.

When, at last, Sol deemed it safe to go into the water he showed himself a very respectable teacher.

"Can't you swim a stroke?" he asked, as they stood, all ready, by the margin.

"Not a stroke. I've waded around a little, down at the seashore and in the surf at Coney Island, but that's not swimming."

"It's very easy. All there is to swimming is not to be afraid. The water'll carry you if you'll give it a fair chance."

"I ain't afraid. I can do anything I see you do."

"Can you let yourself stay under, all but your

face, and just lean forward and move your arms slowly?"

"I guess so."

"Not fast at all? Just lie out in the water and pull ahead, without getting in a hurry?"

"I can. You'll see."

"Then just follow me. Mind, if you get flurried you'll go under, and if you don't you won't. That's all there is of swimming."

Van had seen men swim before, often enough, and it seemed to him he understood what Sol meant. Still, it must have taken a good deal of clean grit for him to go right in after his young teacher, as he did, and rigidly imitate every motion Sol made.

Then came the surprise of it.

Van found that it was just as Sol said. The water supported him, so long as he only wanted to keep his face above it and kept his arms in motion. It was a wonderfully pleasant sensation, and he fairly shouted with delight as he actually *struck out and swam!*

"You'll do," exclaimed Sol. "The chap that can box and fence as you can won't get tired easy. By and by you'll learn to dive and float

and swim on your back, and all sorts of things. Let's go out, now."

"Oh, I'd like to stay in."

"What, with all that walk before us?"

"And the fish to carry. I'd almost forgotten that. Anyhow, I can swim!"

"You'll never forget how, now you've once learned. The Hinckley boys can swim like fish. It's the best thing about them."

"Where do they come from?"

"Oh, sort of neighbors of mine at home. Didn't used to be, but their folks moved a mile nearer last summer. Their mother thinks they're just perfection."

"What does she think of you?"

"Same thing, unless they've poisoned her mind against me."

If Sol Rogers did not have a good opinion of himself, he was the last boy in the world to let anybody know it.

And then it is just possible he had.

Boys are apt to have, at his age.

However that might be, he and Van made up their minds before they got the basket of fish into Bunkerville that their "game" must have

been eating something on the way. It got heavier and heavier with every mile.

They lugged it pluckily in, however, and were marching proudly down the main street towards home, when Sol suddenly broke out with:

“I say, Van, something’s up over yonder. There’s the Hinckley boys and their whole crowd.”

“And there’s Pat Nolan, too, with his back against the fence. Come on, Sol. Let’s go right in.”

CHAPTER V

A RAID ON A MARKET BASKET

PAT NOLAN'S first intimate acquaintance with the wood-pile began that very Saturday morning. Two great wagon-loads of "four feet sticks" of maple, beech, oak and hickory, came in from Mrs. Porrance's farm and were pitched over into the backyard, just behind the hen-house.

"You needn't cord it up," said Mrs. Porrance, as Pat stood ruefully looking at it. "Black Sam'll be here in a few minutes to saw it. You can split for awhile. You'll soon learn. I mean to have the wood-house full before cold weather sets in. Splitting wood is good exercise for boys."

Pat did not exactly dislike the idea of swinging an ax, though he would very much have preferred fishing, if he could have had his choice. He was glad, however, that the sawbuck business was to fall to the share of Black Sam.

That sable gentleman soon came limping into

the yard, with the rough tools of his trade on his shoulders.

“’Mornin’ to ye.”

“Good-morning,” replied Pat.

“Mighty fine load ob wood. Doesn’t get sech wood nowadays as we used ter. Den it was all hick’ry and maple. Nebber heerd ob anything else. Golly! dey had fireplaces den. Didn’t saw and split dar wood into kindlin’s. Dey just burned de logs whole. Dem was de times foh me, sah.”

And Sam whacked down his sawbuck, put a stick on it, put his “game” leg on that, and began to ply his saw as if he had a spite against that particular piece of timber.

No sooner had he sawed off a short length than Pat seized upon it, and began to attack it with the ax he had picked up in the wood-house.

“Look o’ heah!” shortly exclaimed Sam, as he ceased the motion of his sawing, “my deah young friend and fellah-trabler, jist you git a leetle funder away wid dat ax. I doesn’t want my head split open. Not jist yet. I isn’t good enough to go, I isn’t.”

Pat blushed at such a comment on his skill,



"THAT'LL DO, PAT; THAT'S ENOUGH FOR ONCE"

but he moved away, and Sam vouchsafed him such advice in the management of his heavy tool as rendered his own toes also a good deal safer than they otherwise might have been.

"It's a marcy. I wasn't brung up in de city," remarked Sam. "I mought not hab knowed any more'n you do. I isn't a bit proud, I isn't. Is you gwine to de 'cad'my?"

"Yes; that's what I came for."

"Den you's lucky to git a chance to larn how to split wood at de same time. Oh, but wouldn't ye spile a saw quick!"

Very likely; but Pat watched the black expert that day until he thought he knew something about it.

It was easy work with most of that wood, but now and then Pat came upon a knot that puzzled him.

He was hard at it on one of these tough customers when he heard Mrs. Porrance from the kitchen doorway:

"That'll do, Pat. That's enough for once." And when he came in she added, "Now you may go to your room and your books for awhile."

"I'm going to write a letter to my mother," said Pat.

"That's a good boy. Tell her you're well and happy, and that you won't waste any of your precious time in idleness."

"I'll tell her I'm learning to split wood," dryly returned Pat.

"That's nothing to what you'll learn before spring. But you've done very well for a green hand."

Pat was anxious to get at his letter, for he had a world of things to tell. It was the first letter he had ever written, except in his public-school exercises, and he gave his whole mind to it. There was no danger but what it would prove a good one in the loving eyes that were to read it.

After it was done, however, Pat had a yet more difficult task. He had made up his mind to pen a letter of thanks to Dr. Becker and Katrina, and that was a very different thing from writing to his own mother.

He spoiled sheet after sheet of paper in a somewhat extravagant sort of way. Dinner-time came and he was still at it. At the table both Mrs. Porrance and her daughter had questions to

ask him, and Almira did not confine herself to his lessons, as her mother did.

She even asked him about the little girl whose life he had saved.

That unloosed Pat's tongue wonderfully, and may have helped him afterwards with his letter, but he wound up with :

"Dr. Becker gave me all my books. He gave me the one you are reading."

"There, Almira," remarked Mrs. Porrance. "I was wondering where you got it. So it's Patrick's!"

"Oh, she's welcome to it ——"

"Well, all I want to say is, it mustn't go out of the house."

"Jenny Treadwell ——"

"Jenny can't have it, then, nor anybody else. Tell her I said so. I don't intend Pat's books shall go wandering round the village. He doesn't keep a circulating library."

Pat kept still, but he was by no means sorry to hear it, for his mind had troubled him a little on that head.

When he got back to his room he was not disturbed again for a long time, and his letter to

Dr. Becker was completed, after a fashion. It did not exactly please Pat's notions, but it was a creditable performance, all things considered.

He scarcely knew what time it was when Mrs. Porrance called him again into the dining-room.

There was a large, covered basket on the table, and she held out to him a folded paper.

"That's my list for the grocery. All you have to do is to hand it in at Calkins & Mugger's, and bring home what they give you. It will be quite a basketful, but you are strong enough."

"I guess so," said Pat, as he picked up the basket. "Where are Calkins & Mugger?"

"Up the street. Three squares beyond the green. It's quite a little distance, but you can take your own time to it."

So Pat took his basket, and then he took his time.

It was really the first good look he had had at the beauties of Bunkerville, undisturbed by any load on his mind greater than an order for groceries.

He kept his eyes busy, and he made up his mind that there were more boys and girls, of

all sizes, than there could be in any other village of the same size.

The boys, particularly, seemed quite numerous, but none of them troubled him with more than a sharp and curious glance or so, on his way to Calkins & Mugger's. He found things there a trifle busy, as was apt to be the case on a Saturday afternoon, and when his turn came to be served he quickly made up his mind that Mrs. Porrance must have been nearly out of everything when he and his friends arrived.

Such a succession of different packages—none of them very large, to be sure—he had never before seen tied up for one customer. No, not even by Mr. Maguire himself.

“He'd like her for a steady one,” muttered Pat to himself, as he took his well-filled basket on his arm and lugged it out into the street.

It had never occurred to him that he was in any peril of interference in broad daylight.

Such a thing would have been impossible in the great city he had come from, where what are known as the “dangerous classes” take quite another time of day for their operations.

Scarcely had he trudged half way back to the

corner of the village green with his load, however, before he found himself confronted by half a dozen boys of various sizes, none of whom he had ever seen before, so far as he could remember.

“That’s him, Bob.”

“Mother Porran’s brand new Irish boy!”

“Hullo, red-head! what have you got in your basket?”

“If he belongs to the academy, so does his basket.”

“It’s his lunch, I guess.”

“Give us a look at it, will yer?”

A perfect storm of remarks, questions, demands, mingled with what were meant for jokes, poured upon poor Pat, who had never in all his life before felt himself so completely alone.

He was a stranger in a strange land, with a big basket on his arm, and he scarcely knew what to do about it.

His first impulse was to back up against the nearest fence and put down his basket.

“You mind your own business and I’ll mind mine,” he said, as he did so, and with a deepening color in his face.

"Hullo, Joe, if Paddy isn't showing fight!" exclaimed Bob Hinckley.

"We'll hustle him. Go for his basket. We owe Mother Porrance a good turn."

So they did, the ungrateful lubbers! but her refusal to receive them again had not pleased them over well. Their present malice was directed even more against their former landlady than even the raw Irish boy from the city.

Against any one, or even two, of his tormentors, Pat could have made a respectable show of defense; but he could do little to stop the sudden rush that now swept over him, although he struck out right and left, with a good deal more force and promptness than had been counted on.

Bob and Joe and their friends had expected something more like a game of "pull away," and their numbers and strength were likely to carry the day.

Down went Pat, and over went his basket.

It looked as if Mrs. Porrance was in a fair way to hear a poor account of her new boy's first errand, when there came a sudden change in the aspect of affairs.

Bob Hinckley was shouting "Hurra, boys!

Down with the Paddy!" when he felt his legs suddenly jerked out from under him, and he rolled over and over on the grass, followed by his brother and then by one, two, three, four of their "crowd."

Something very like a small mob seemed suddenly to have gathered, and there was Van Rivington and Sol Rogers helping Pat gather his scattered cargo, while a big, brawny chap, whom the boys recognized as the stage-driver who had brought them over, was growling between his teeth:

"Down wid the Paddy, is it, ye dhirty spalpanes? Av ye was ownly a bit bigger I'd break ivery bone of yiz."

"What business is it of yours, anyway?" began Bob, rubbing his left knee.

"Me name's Denis Mullaly, and I'm from Limerick ——"

"Oh, it's all right, Bob," interrupted Sol Rogers; "we only came in for our share of the fun. Give him back his things and let him go home."

"Yes," added Van; "fun is fun, but they ought not to keep anything."

"Keep anything?" shouted Bob. "Do you mean to call me a thief?"

"Or me?" roared Joe.

"Or me?"

"Or me?" added their friends, in chorus.

"No, of course not," said Van, quietly. "But what made you put Mrs. Porrance's things in your pockets?"

"It won't do, Robert," said Sol. "Dr. Betts is awfully down on stealing."

A keen twinkle in Pat Nolan's eyes showed that a hint had been given him, but he said nothing.

"Stealing? Pockets?" shouted Bob Hinekley, as he thrust his hands in his own.

"Pull 'em out," said Van. "You can't get away with it this time. That's it. What's that package, Pat?"

"Thim's the raisins, I reckon."

"Raisins, eh? So, Bob, you got the raisins, did you?" said Van. "Well, hand 'em over. Did you get anything else? Hello, what's that?"

"That's the alum!" shouted Pat.

"Hurroo, if this isn't fun!" exclaimed Denis

Mullaly, while unlucky Bob Hinckley looked as if he would like to sink into the ground.

But it was now his brother's turn.

"Come, Joe," said Sol Rogers, "hand over. Empty your pockets. Let's see how much you got. You are a great grief to me, Joseph."

"If he didn't freeze to the starch," said Pat. "The saleratus, too!"

"Now, you pug-nosed chap," said Van, to another of the hustlers, "out with your stealings."

"There's the Castile soap! And that other one's turned up the cloves!"

And the gathering mob of bystanders joined in the yell of derision that burst from the now triumphant Pat Nolan.

"You're a nice lot," said Van Rivington, solemnly. "I'll let you up this time, but if you ever interfere with Pat again, or Mrs. Porrance's grocery-basket ——"

"I didn't take 'em!" howled Bob Hinckley. "It's all a fraud!"

"Go home, Robert," said Sol Rogers, with a mocking grin on his not very handsome face. "I won't tell your folks about it. You and Joseph are young yet. Reform!"

The Hinckley boys, and everybody else, for that matter, knew there was some "sell" about it, but just how it had been worked was too much for them.

The jeering as they sneaked away was something they were not likely to forget very soon.

Pat Nolan had now restored his treasures to their proper place and picked up his basket.

"We'd help you," said Van, "but we've got basket enough of our own."

"You had some luck, then?"

"Tiptop," said Sol; "and you ought to have seen Van swim. He'll beat either one of us one of these days."

"If I ever do," said Van, "I'll spend my time on the ferry-boats till I get a chance to save somebody."

"Try a small girl first," said Sol; "they're easier than big ones."

"They're worth saving, too," said Pat, as he thought of Katrina Becker's bright face and golden hair.

"Yes," laughed Sol; "you can get books for it."

Sol was a little ashamed of that remark when he got to the house, for Mrs. Porrance told him,

as soon as he came in, that an express package for him had arrived by the afternoon stage, and, while Pat was making his report of his somewhat stirring adventures, the other two boys hurried up-stairs.

“From your folks, most likely,” said Van.

“No, it isn’t,” replied Sol, as he picked up the long and somewhat heavy package. “It’s from the city.”

It was opened in a twinkling.

“A leather gun-case !”

“And a gun in it.”

“And all the fixings, ammunition and all. What a splendid double-barrel !”

There it was, and with it a very nicely-worded letter of gratitude from Dr. and Mrs. Becker and little Katrina.

“How did he know anything about my symptoms ?” exclaimed Sol. “It takes a doctor for that. It’s the very prescription I needed.”

“Hope it’ll do you good,” said Van. “I feel more like swimming than I ever did before. It’s a grand, good gun.”

Pat Nolan watched with special interest while

Mrs. Porrance compared the contents of the basket with her written memorandum.

"All right," she said, at last. "But how did so much dirt get on the papers?"

Pat had no objection whatever to give an account of his trip to the grocery, and he did it in a way that was closely listened to by his landlady and her daughter—that is, he told it capitally well.

"The young vagabonds!" exclaimed Almira. "They ought to be flogged!"

"Oh, they didn't really steal 'em," said Pat. "I guess that was Van's work. They didn't know when the papers were put in their pockets."

"Served 'em right," said Mrs. Porrance. "The whole village'll be laughing at them. They're bad boys, Pat, and you must look out for them."

"I'll do that same; but they'll be letting me alone for a bit."

"No, they won't. They'll never forgive either of you for getting the laugh on them. They tormented Sol last year."

"Troth, and they'll have a good time tormenting any one this year. There's three of us, now."

"That makes a difference, I must say. Sol Rogers never brought home anything like so many fish before."

"I can clane fish."

"We'll have them for breakfast. Put the basket in the kitchen."

Just then they were startled by a loud report of a gun, that seemed to be almost over their heads, accompanied by a sound of smashing glass and a loud exclamation.

"Mercy on us!" screamed Almira; but Mrs. Porrance was out of the door and on her way up-stairs almost as quickly as Pat himself. "Oh, I hope nobody's killed!"

"Nonsense, Almira! I only want to know what those boys are up to now."

The widow's nerves were good. There was no doubt of that.

"Oh, Mrs. Porrance," shouted Sol, as she entered the room, "look at my new gun!"

"Look at my broken window. What did you fire through it for?"

"I didn't mean to shoot. Van had put a cartridge in to try it, and I snapped the trigger, so it went off."

"You might have aimed at an open window, then. It isn't safe to let children have guns. They belong to men, who can take care of them."

Perhaps she did not understand boys, and then perhaps she did.

"Children, indeed!"

Sol and Van looked at one another with flushed faces. They were both vowing hard not to have any more accidents with gunpowder.

Then Mrs. Porrance examined the gun.

"I guess it's safe not to burst," she said, quietly. "I'll show you how to use it. Is it the first you ever saw?"

"Mrs. Porrance," responded Sol, with an effort at dignity, "I was born on the fourth of July, and I know all about guns. I can hit a window at six feet."

"I see you can. You can pay for mending it, too. I'm glad you didn't shoot Van Rivington. It wouldn't be so easy to mend him."

That was a pretty serious thought, and there was little danger of any more carelessness in handling Dr. Becker's present.

Now, however, the story had to come out.

Almira had somewhat hesitatingly ventured into the room, and Van told the whole thing, as he had seen it from the ferry-boat.

“I thought it was all Pat’s doing,” said the widow. “Well, Sol, you earned your gun. I’ll forgive you this time. Never mind about the window. Only you mustn’t break any more. Almira, let’s go down and get supper. I don’t believe they could swim ashore with a grown-up child like you.”

It looked as if she had small sympathy for her daughter’s nervousness, real or pretended, and she left the boys to a further examination of the gun.

They were careful not to put in any more cartridges.

“I don’t care,” said Sol; “it’s the first breech-loader I ever handled.”

“And it smashed that pane of glass beautiful,” exclaimed Pat.

Both he and Van were contriving plans of their own for the acquisition of some sort of shooting-iron. The latter decided upon making a strong appeal to his father, but he doubted the success of it. Not but what Mr. Rivington was

ready to give his boy anything in season, but Mrs. Rivington's delicate health was in the way of some things. She was nervously afraid of firearms, and it would never do to have her imagining accidents to her darling. Van knew that, too, and he would not have given his mother a moment's anxiety for the world.

"Father has never forbidden my having a gun," he said to himself, "and I know he used to be a sportsman. I'm not sure but what he'd like it first-rate. I'll write to him, anyway."

That was the correct thing to do. Van was not the sort of a boy to hide anything, and those are the boys who generally have very little that needs hiding. They can look everybody straight in the eyes all their lives.

As for Pat, such a gun as Sol's was out of the question for him, of course, but there were others to be had, and he solidly made up his mind to have one.

Take it all around, their first Saturday in Bunkerville was a great day for those three boys, and so it had been, in a different way, for Bob and Joe Hinckley and their friends.

While Mrs. Porrance's boarders were examin-

ing Dr. Becker's present, the other lot were discussing the very remarkable manner in which they had been jerked away from their victim, as well as the deep mystery of all those things having been found in their pockets.

"Denis Mullaly helped 'em."

"We'll shoot peas at his horses."

"We must get even with him, somehow."

"But he's awful strong. I heard a man say he was the strongest fellow he ever knew."

"That's from driving four-in-hand."

"I tell you what, boys, that Van Rivington's a cute fellow."

"We've got to look out for him."

"We must give him a lesson, first thing. Teach him his place."

"Can't have any white-fingered city chap cutting up shines here!"

"We're beat for to-day, anyhow," finally remarked Bob.

"That's a fact," said Joe. "Don't I wish I knew how they did it?"

"Oh, it was easy enough while we were all tumbling around on the grass."

"Well, Bob, we'll all tumble around again, and

you see how many things you can put in our pockets while we're tumbling."

That was scarcely fair, since they would now be looking out for tricks, and Bob did not see fit to try it.

Meantime, however, the story had traveled everywhere, Denis Mullaly himself having taken a special delight in telling it to as many as he could.

He told it at Calkins & Mugger's, at the livery-stable, at the tavern, and whoever he told it to carried it somewhere else, and it grew as it went, until it became the biggest kind of a story.

So Bob and Joe discovered, as they walked along towards the house where they boarded, at the upper end of the village. Even small boys that were afraid of them mustered courage to grin, and say something about pepper, cloves, saleratus, and Mrs. Porrance's Irish boy.

It was hard to bear, and they vowed vengeance. There was no doubt but what Sol Rogers and his friends would do well to keep their eyes about them from that day forth. They were likely to do so.

The following day was Sunday, and Pat and

Van thought they had never seen nor heard of anything so still and quiet as that village was, except while the people were going to and from the churches on the green.

“It’s as dead as the city is down-town after six o’clock,” said Van.

“Deader than that,” replied Pat. “Why, there isn’t a policeman in sight.”

Just so, nor any need for one, for even the academy boys kept Sunday, after a fashion. Some of them better and some of them worse.

Sol was better accustomed to the ways of the place, and he persuaded Van to go to church with him in the morning.

“If you don’t,” he argued, “Almira’ll make you go with her. Mrs. Porrance never meddles.”

“I thought your folks belonged to the same denomination?” said Van. “Mine don’t.”

“That’s so, but I don’t want my views and Almira’s to run together. She doesn’t, either. She’s given me up. You’re a head taller than I am, even if you ain’t so good-looking. Be wise, young man, be wise.”

“What about Pat?”

"Oh, he can take care of himself. I'm not troubled about Patrick. Miss Almira 'll let him alone. His hair's too red. He's safe."

"But he ought to go to church."

"So he will. He went to Mass this morning. He's a wonderfully good fellow, considering his bringing-up. The city's an awfully wicked place."

"That's where I came from."

"Well, look at the difference between you and Pat, and, for instance, me!"

In spite of the soberness with which he tried to say it, Sol broke down just there, and Van joined in the laugh.

There was a difference, no doubt, but Sol Rogers would scarcely have got much of a medal on the ground of his "goodness," at least as compared to his two friends. There was nothing very bad about either of them, whether from city or country, but there was a great deal of what the world good-naturedly calls "boy," and it is not always the same as "goodness."

Not till it is trained up, toned down, knocked about and trimmed.

Still, Mrs. Porrance was compelled to say, at supper-time :

“Well, Almira, they’ve done a deal better than I expected. They’ve even managed to let that gun alone.”

“And they went to church.”

But she did not know how earnestly all day the three boys had thought of “home.”

There were a good many people receiving letters from their “boys at school” early that following week, and probably they were all proud of them. Van’s father was of the one that came to him, but he shook his head over the request for a gun.

“You’d never consent to that, would you, mother?”

“I’m afraid of some accident.”

“If he gets hold of some worthless old barrel up there, it may burst. I’d rather he had a good one.”

“Better have none at all.”

“But Sol has one. It’s a little hard on Van. Had I not better pick him out a safe, sound, stub and twist, a breech-loader, and send it to him?”

“Don’t say anything more to me about it,

then," said Mrs. Rivington. "I'll try and not think of it. He's a dear, good boy."

And she was a dear, good mother, too, and so things looked better for Van than he had hoped.

Sol Roger's father and mother were used to his letters, but that one raised a bigger laugh than common, for it told the story of the basket.

"Don't speak of it to Mrs. Hinckley," advised Sol's father. "Let her boys tell their own story."

"They won't tell much about it."

"Then we needn't. Sol and Van seem to have acted rightly."

But if those two letters were good ones, what were they to Pat Nolan's own?

Oh, but didn't his mother's face shine with pride as she showed that paper to Mr. Maguire!

"The b'y! To think of his writin' all o' that! It's the grand scholar he'll be."

"Just the sort o' writin' for the grocery thrade," said Mr. Maguire. "He must learn to kape books."

"'Dade, an' he will; an' to write 'em, too. He's not the b'y to play thricks on, ayther."

“Sure, ’an I’m as proud of him as av his name was Maguire.”

“Are ye? Ye’re a good sort of a man, Misther Maguire. I’m glad ye loiks Pat.”

He had found the weak side of Pat’s mother, at all events. It was just where the weak side of any boy’s mother is apt to be found.

And little Katrina was very proud to have a letter from the boy that saved her life. She thought he was the bravest and handsomest boy in all the world, red hair or no red hair.

However, the first days of that first week of school left only a vague impression on the minds of these three youngsters at Bunker Academy. It was a sort of general confusion, out of which, under the skilful hands of Dr. Betts and Miss McCracken, the three hundred scholars gradually settled into their proper places.

There were little folks of from ten years old and upward, whose parents lived in the village, and there were full-grown young men and women from near and far.

As Sol Rogers expressed it:

“It’s about the completest mix there ever was. I never want a family like this, Van.”

"I should say not. They'd be too much for you."

"They're almost too much for poor little Dr. Betts. We must do what we can for him, Van."

"What can we do?"

"Help him keep down the dangerous elements. Such as Bob and Joe Hinckley, I mean. He can't do for those boys what we can."

"They're trying to do something for us or I'm mistaken," said Van, quietly. "Maybe they want to give Dr. Betts a little help."

"I wish I knew what they were up to. Most likely they'll begin on Pat."

They had tried to, indeed, but Pat's duties at Mrs. Porrance's wood-pile were keeping him away from the village green just now. He managed to get to the academy in time, mornings, but there was barely time at noon for eating dinner, and he hurried away at three o'clock, when "hours" were over, so there had thus far been little chance to get at him.

Under Black Sam's instructions, he was beginning to handle his ax fairly well, and he was proud of that. The pile of split wood in the

wood-house was rapidly increasing, but Sam and his saw were away ahead of the ax work, and a new load came in every day.

"Troth, and we'll not freeze this winter if she can help it," muttered Pat, as a fresh arrival came one morning. "I'm glad of that. But it must be a cowld time she's providin' for."

He had never seen a New England winter, and he was yet to learn what a grand, good thing a big wood-pile is.

Pat's Greek and Latin lessons were, as yet, with one of the lowest classes; but he was working hard for promotion.

As he told Dr. Betts:

"It's little else, sir, that I've to study the now. I've been all through me other things before, only not in the same books."

"It won't hurt you to review them," kindly returned the doctor. "You can give your time to your Greek and Latin till you're fit for an advance. I will not forget you."

He did not.

Neither did Pat forget to examine the seat of his schoolroom chair, every time he sat down in it, after his first experience with a "jumping-pin."

"Sure and I put me own foot in the slack to it," he explained to Van and Sol; "and the way it went into me was cruel. It's a regular thrap!"

"Did you yell?"

"Didn't I, then? And wasn't Dr. Betts comin' into the room at the very minute? Wonder if he thought it was the sight of him brought the voice from me?"

"He understands pins," drawled Sol. "Some wicked boys fixed one in his chair in chapel once."

"Did he jump?"

"No; but he got up and looked around."

"Were they ever found out?"

"Found out? No. The doctor never mentioned it. But it was a big pin."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I heard."

"Then I know what he meant by what he said. He came straight to my desk, and when I showed him the pin I'd pulled out of me, he took it and looked at it, and said:

"‘H'm! A smaller one, but it must have hurt. You must be careful what you sit down on, Patrick.’"

“‘Troth and I’ll be that, sir,’ said I, and he smiled and walked away.”

“It’s one of the Hinckley boys, I’ll be bound!” exclaimed Sol. “Oh, but won’t we settle with them some of these days!”

“We needn’t hurry,” said Van. “My father says there’s nothing surer than pay-day.”

And so Pat kept a sharp lookout for pins and that sort of thing, and made any number of acquaintances among the other scholars, like the merry, good-natured, laughing fellow he was, but there was no manner of doubt but what he had the reddest head of hair in Bunkerville Academy that term.

“Pins? Jumping-pins?” Sol had remarked to Van. “No, they won’t try anything so old on you or me; but we must keep our eyes peeled. Pins are nothing to what they’re mean enough to do. Is my hair turning gray?”

“Can’t see that it is.”

“I’ve enough to make it, then. Why won’t those Hinckley boys take more after me?”

“I should say that was what they were doing.”

“Then I wish Denis Mullaly would take after them with his coach-whip, that’s all.”

It was a troublesome state of suspense to be in, to be sure, but the lookout they kept was not one whit too sharp. The following Friday morning was beautifully bright and sunny, and there was a tiptop game of baseball going forward on the green, but Sol and Van had somehow got into the discussion of the gun question, and what they should do next day, and they walked on into the academy together. The main door was open, and so was that of the large room where their own desks were, but not a soul was there yet, besides themselves. The desks were close together, but they both stopped at Van's. Sol laid his head down on it for a moment, as if he had some hard thinking to do, and then he sprang suddenly to his feet.

"Van, what have you been up to? You haven't told me a word about it."

"Up to? Nothing, that I know of."

"But what's in your desk, then? Don't lift the lid. Just listen."

Both heads were down now, listening hard, but all they could distinguish was what sounded like a vicious and angry hum.

“Steady,” said Sol. “Did you lock your desk yesterday afternoon?”

“Yes, I did. I’m sure.”

“Did you lock in any humming-birds, that you know of?”

“Guess not. That sounds a good deal more like stinging-birds.”

“I should say it did. Now, that beats jumping-pins all hollow. What’ll we do, Van?”

“Guess we won’t open that desk while we’re close to it. There must be enough in there to sting a whole roomful. Just hark!”

“Your books are in there, some of ’em. We can take off the inkstand, unscrew the feet, and have the whole thing out the back door in less’n no time.”

“Quick, then,” said Van. “There’s no time to lose.”

A screw-driver was gone for, the desk was loosed from the floor and carried to the rear of the academy.

Then a string was fastened to the lid, the key was turned in the lock, the two friends retreated a little distance, and then ——

One good jerk, and not only the lid was

opened, but the desk itself was upset upon the grass.

Books, papers tumbled out, but no matter for them, for they were followed by an immense "yellow-jackets' " nest.

"How could it ever have got there?" said Van. "How did any of 'em dare touch it?"

"Easy enough," said Sol. "Cover it and cut it off the branch it was built on, some time in the night, when the stingers were asleep. They must know some way of getting into the academy after it's locked, and so they put it in your desk."

"But I locked my desk; how's that?"

"Easy enough unlocked. Most any key'd open it."

"Then I'll have another lock put on right away. But, Sol, just look at those yellow-jackets."

"They're charging straight through the window into the academy."

"Quick! let's get the desk back into its place. Tumble the books in. I'll lock it."

Never was a job done more rapidly. It was safe enough to pick up the desk, now the angry

insects had abandoned it, but they were sure to come back for another look at their ruined nest, which had rolled away several feet in the up-setting.

Into the main room hurried the boys, and the desk, with all its former contents in it except the hornets, was safely screwed down in its place.

"Stinging-birds!" exclaimed Sol; "I should say so! There they come."

"Yow!" shouted Van, as he gave the screw-driver a last twist. "That was one of 'em. Cut, Sol!"

Not another soul, teacher or scholar, had yet come in, for it was not even "chapel time" and the two friends made their escape without any further damage.

"Wouldn't we have got it if we'd opened that desk in the usual way?" remarked Van, as he plastered some soft mud behind his left ear, where that yellow-jacket had made his mark.

"Reckon we would," said Sol. "Glad none of that came to my share. If there's one thing in the world I've a dislike for, it's a hornet sting."

"That's about the way I feel about it."

"Don't you think we'd better be a little late to school to-day?"

"Why?"

"Oh, there won't be any roll-call, nor any chapel, either. I hope no one saw us go in or come out."

"Guess not," said Van; "but I'll tell you what we'd better do."

"Give Bob and Joe a licking?"

"Perhaps. But that'll come soon enough, or I'm mistaken. Just now we'd better warn Dr. Betts."

"Warn him! The yellow-jackets 'll do that."

"There he comes, now."

"Well," said Sol, "come to think, I wouldn't like to see that head of his all stung up. It's big enough now. How does your ear feel?"

"Better'n his will if we don't keep him away from that room."

Just at the edge of the green the two boys met the dignified principal of the academy.

"You want to see me about something?" was his inquiring response to their respectful greeting. "Has anything gone wrong?"

"A little wrong," said Van, feeling behind his ear.

"About the academy? What is it? I'll hear you now."

"Too many yellow-jackets to suit me," said Sol.

"Yellow-jackets? Young man!"

"Yes, sir," said Van. "The main room is full of them. One of 'em stung me. Right there, sir. Looks as if they meant to capture the school."

"Possible! I'll see about it. I'll investigate the matter at once."

"I guess I wouldn't, if I were you. I'd have somebody else to do the investigating."

"Why so, sir? Why so?"

"Because, doctor, they're all there yet. The liveliest set of buzzers you ever saw."

Dr. Betts was a man of sense as well as of dignity and learning, and he knew something about yellow-jackets as well as about other things, so that Sol's caution was by no means lost on him.

The question was, however, what it was best to do, and the answer did not come right away.

"We'll run ahead, doctor," said Van, "and see how matters are getting on."

"You're right," said Sol, as they got out of the doctor's hearing. "It won't do to let the other boys know we found it out first."

"I wouldn't mind that so much," replied Van, "but I don't want those Hinckley boys to know I got stung. Please 'em too much."

"That would be too bad. But look, Van, the fun's beginning."

The yellow-jacket business was indeed "public property."

Such a yelling and hooting, and such a stream of boys pouring in and out of the doors of the academy building.

At the same time a gathering crowd of girls, "young lady students," and then villagers, began to line the more safe and distant borders of the green.

"A tumult, indeed!" the boys heard Dr. Betts remark, as he hurried solemnly past them, and they wondered what in all the world he would try to do about it.

"He can't drive 'em out."

"Not if he was twenty of him."

"'Twon't do him any good to send for the trustees."

"Wish he would, then. I'd bet on the yellow-jackets."

But even while they were discussing the matter they heard some news that fitted their sense of justice to a hair.

The first boys to enter that schoolroom after Van and Sol left it had been Bob and Joe Hinckley, followed by half a dozen more of their own particular "crowd."

They had done so without a suspicion but what their cunningly-set trap was quietly awaiting the arrival of their intended victims.

That was where the joke came in.

There had been plenty of insects in that remarkable nest.

It must have been a rare one, both for size and population.

The very Babylon and capital city of the great hornet nation.

What was more, the angry and buzzing multitude were in no manner of doubt as to what they wanted to do, or how they meant to do it.

And every one of them knew how.

They had lost their own building, they had determined to take Bunker Academy in place of it.

Therefore the Hinckley boys and their companions were intruders, and they and all other human beings were to be driven out, regardless.

And drive them out they did.

Pity they could not have known what an even-handed sort of justice they were doing.

Very nicely stung was every boy of that unlucky company, and every boy of them felt it hurt him all the worse because it was the very thing he had been planning for somebody else.

Now, however, the alarm became general, and there was a grand declaration of war, in which the male scholars joined ferociously, as fast as they arrived.

It would never do, however, to have Bunker Academy knocked to pieces in the way that was threatened, and so Dr. Betts announced from the front steps that :

“The educational exercises are unavoidably interrupted for the time being. You will reassemble at the close of the noon recess, at the sound of the bell.”

"Van," said Sol Rogers, "the bell won't ring as soon as that."

"Guess the doctor hasn't had a chance to count those yellow-jackets."

He had not, indeed, and it was late in the day before he felt at all sure that the last of his plucky invaders was "dead or banished."

The doctor learned a good deal that day, for Mrs. Betts had to try everything she could hear of that was "good for stings" before he could eat his dinner in any sort of comfort. And it was poor comfort, then.

"It's all very mysterious," he remarked to his wife, as she put some hartshorn on the bald spot on the top of his head. "There's mischief in it. It is the work of some of the boys. Not of Sol or Van, I think."

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST GUNNING TRIP

PAT NOLAN came over from Mrs. Porrance's wood-pile just in time to hear Dr. Betts announce that there would be no school that morning.

Very quickly thereafter he received Sol Roger's assurance that there would be none in the afternoon, either, and with it, from him and Van, an account of the hornet business.

"The spalpeens!" exclaimed Pat. "Did they mean to have us all sthung to death? But I'm glad the little fellows got afther thim. It's little they'll bother us for a day or two."

"I guess so," said Van; "but now what'll we do with our time?"

"Do with it?" said Pat. "Faith, I know what I'm afther."

"What, then?"

"The gunsmith's. He's got a shop down beyond Calkins & Mugger's, and I'm bound to see what's in it."

"What's in it?" exclaimed Sol. "There's pretty much of everything. It's a regular curiosity-shop. Come on, Van; let's go with him. But there's no breech-loader there like mine."

"Do you mean to buy a gun, Pat?"

"I can't say, Van; it's a queer feeling I have about that same. Maybe if I don't have one I'll be stealing Sol's some day."

"That would be bad. But guns cost a deal of money—good ones."

"Sure anything'll do for the likes o' me. I'll see what he's got, anyhow. The yellow-jackets have fixed things for us."

So they had, and in a few minutes more all three of them were standing in the workroom of old Martin's gunshop, looking around upon the queer collection of firearms of all sorts which had accumulated there since the days of Martin's grandfather and the Revolutionary War.

As for the grizzled gunsmith himself, he was at work on a new rifle, and he kept right on until Van Rivington picked up an odd-looking piece and asked him what it was.

"That? That's an old cavalry carbine. One of the first patterns of breech-loaders. It's a

mighty good weapon, and it throws an ounce-ball, but it's out of date."

"Rifled, is it?"

"Of course. Couldn't use shot in it. No good to either of you."

"I could practice at a mark with it if I had cartridges. What would you sell it for?"

"Not for sale. I'd lend it to you for practice. Let you have all the cartridges you want. They'd cost you something."

"Any danger it'll burst?"

"Never a bit. None of those government guns ever burst. I can put it in order in ten minutes."

"That'll do for me, then."

But just then their attention was attracted by a loud exclamation from Pat Nolan.

"Moses! Mr. Martin, what sort of a thing do you call this?"

"That's what the early settlers used to fight the Indians with. It's a bell-muzzled fowling-piece."

"Then they didn't call for any cannon in thim days. Look at her, boys."

Well they might, for the bell-muzzle of the

huge single-barrel reached above Pat Nolan's cap-front.

It was brown with rust, stocked nearly to the muzzle, the lock was an old-fashioned flint-lock, and the whole thing was heavier than any sort of rifle or shotgun now in use.

"What'll you take for that same?" soberly inquired Pat.

"Take for it? You couldn't do anything with that. It isn't worth old iron, except for a curiosity."

"Troth and I'll buy it, then. I want a gun that won't cost much."

"Tell you what I'll do," said old Martin, with a twinkle of fun in his spectacled eyes. "I'll clean it up for you, and you can shoot with it for a day or so. Then if you like it, I'll fix it up in modern style. It hasn't been fired off since my grandfather's day."

The old gunsmith came slowly down from his high stool by the work-bench, and took hold of the venerable piece as if he had a new idea in his head.

He put it in a vise and unscrewed the lock; took out the breech-pin, after more than one

sharp tug with a big wrench ; then he ran a steel "rimmer" through the barrel till he brought out more than a little dirt and rust ; then he tinkered a while at the lock, using an unusual quantity of rags and oil.

It took him over half an hour of rapid and skilful work before he began to put the piece together again, remarking :

"There, I'll put in a fresh flint, and then, I declare, I believe she'll go off. But won't it take a heap of powder and shot to load her !"

"I should say it would," said Van Rivington, as he looked down the gaping muzzle.

"Powder was cheap in those days," remarked Sol Rogers.

"Cheap?" said old Martin. "Why, when the Indians were around and it wasn't safe to go out, they used to sit in their houses and sow their corn-fields with that kind of a gun. Two charges'd plant an acre."

"They were big men, weren't they?" asked Pat.

"Big! I guess so. Bigger'n either of you boys'll ever get to be. Don't raise any such men nowadays."

"Nor such guns, either," said Van.

But the boys had got into the spirit of the thing, and they supplied themselves liberally with ammunition.

"Let's hurry out of the village as fast as we can," said Sol. "We'll go right down the valley. The lower pond's a great place for black-birds, and Pat won't want to carry that cannon any too far. I'll get my gun."

Van had secured his carbine, and it was not a light one by any means.

"It'll carry half a mile," said old Martin. "Never mind if it kicks a little. You'll be sure it's gone off."

Sol hurried back to Mrs. Porrance's after his gun, and was particularly proud of old Martin's admiration of it when he brought it back.

Then they all three set off as if they had a forced march before them, and a battle to come at the end of it, for they did not care to have a crowd of academy boys following them.

"They'd come sure, if they saw us," said Sol, "and that would spoil all the fun."

"I'm curious to see what sort of work Pat's cannon'll do," said Van.

"Don't laugh at that same," said Pat, "till after you've tried your carbine."

There was sense in that, but they were scarcely half a mile below the village, following the winding course of the little "river," as the village people called it, that fed the two mill-ponds, when Sol exclaimed:

"Hist! Look there! There's a chipmunk. Can you hit him, Van?"

"Hit him? That little fellow? He's only six rods off. I'll try. I've practiced a little in a gallery."

He had put one of the heavy army cartridges old Martin had sold him into his carbine, and now he raised it to his shoulder, took a long, careful squint through the sights, and blazed away.

Van had held the carbine firmly, but he spun clean around upon his feet as the loud report rang down the valley.

"Where on earth's that chipmunk gone to?"

"He's missed him," said Pat. "May be the little chap dodged."

"The gun didn't, then," said Van. "My shoulder feels as if a horse had kicked me."

He sprang forward, nevertheless, but there was no sign of his intended "game" on the bit of stone wall where the chipmunk had been sitting.

"Hurroo," shouted Pat Nolan; "here's the tail of him."

"And here's a leg!" screamed Sol, picking up something from the grass about ten feet off. "If that chipmunk wasn't fool enough to try and catch that ball!"

Two or three scattered bits of fur, something that looked like an ear, and that was all they had to show for Van Rivington's first shot. He had not missed, however, and he was inclined to plume himself on that. It had been very bad for the chipmunk.

"Are they good to eat?" asked Van.

"What there is of them may be," said Sol, "but I never heard of one being cooked. We'll go for squirrels one of these days. A fellow don't have to be very hungry to eat squirrel."

"But how this carbine would knock one to pieces!"

"I should say it would. Van, I'm afraid you won't do much on blackbirds with that thing."

"No, nor Pat, either. Pat, are you loaded up?"

"Not yet. Guess it's about time. I know how to load a gun."

"If you don't, I do," said Sol. "Put in your powder first. Shovel in a heap of it or it won't cover the bottom of that awful gun-barrel."

Pat obeyed, and it is just probable he was right about the quantity the gun had been used to in its younger days.

Then a great wad of newspaper was rammed down hard. Then followed a handful of No. 6 shot and another wad, and even then it did not seem as if the old "bell-muzzle" had much of a charge. The flint-lock was something of a puzzler, but Sol had seen one worked, and they made out to get it properly primed, and the pan shut down, all ready for use.

"It's a good deal of a gun, after all," said Van, "but it's well it isn't a double-barrel."

"Come on, boys," shouted Sol. "We're pretty near the pond now, and the blackbirds 'll be thick in the swamp."

The "lower pond" was a long, irregular affair, not very wide, but pretty deep in some

places, with a grist-mill and sawmill at the lower end of it, and a good deal of swampy, bushy land along its western side.

There would have been fish in that pond if there had not been so many boys in Bunkerville.

Now it happened that it was pretty nearly time for the blackbirds of that valley and the surrounding country to gather for their annual trip to the south, and the low bushes around the pond were precisely the place for them to gather in, with plenty of good feeding-grounds close by.

It had been a good year for them, and they were in fine, fat condition.

“Look at them, boys!” exclaimed Sol. “Just see how they swarm in the bushes! They’re fairly black with ’em!”

So they were, not to speak of the flocks that were going and coming.

“Pat,” said Van, “if you let drive at the bushes they’ll rise. Then Sol can let them have it in the air.”

“Exactly the thing,” said Sol. “I was thinking of that. We’re just about ten rods from the thick of ’em. Rest your cannon over the fence, Pat.”

"I'll brace him up," said Van. "It may kick him over."

"Troth, and if it does," said Pat, as he thrust the old gun forward, "I'd rather come down on the grass."

It was not so easy taking aim with that gun, for a fellow who was not accustomed to it; but Pat had cocked it, and he felt sure he had leveled it on a line with the bushes, and he gave the trigger a pull.

"Harder!" shouted Sol. "She won't go off easy. Pull!"

A flash, a tremendous report, a good sharp kick, but not so hard as Van's carbine had given, and then, as a great cloud of blackbirds arose from the bushes, Sol blazed away with both barrels of his new gun. He did not pretend to take aim at any particular bird, but it was a wonder how many fell.

"Shall I run and pick 'em up?" excitedly shouted Van Rivington.

"No, sir-e-e!" replied Sol. "They'll settle in a minute, and we'll give 'em another grist."

Curiously enough, he was right.

The breech-loader was quickly ready, but by

the time the "bell-muzzle" was loaded again the bushes looked almost as black as ever.

How she did roar with that second discharge! and once more Sol did good execution with his right and left.

"They won't settle there again this morning," said Sol. "Let's go in and pick up as soon as we've loaded. We may have to swim for some of em."

No, but they had to wade and to scramble among the bushes and flags over quite a piece of that swamp before they picked up all their birds.

"It seems a pity to have murdered so many of 'em," said Van.

"Does it?" replied Sol. "You just wait, then, till you've eaten blackbirds on toast or a blackbird potpie. You won't feel half so bad about it after that."

"We've knocked down over a hundred of 'em," remarked Pat Nolan.

There was little probability that the frightened blackbirds would settle again among those bushes that day, and the boys made their search a thorough one.

"It's the only game we're likely to get," said Sol. "I wouldn't shoot 'em at any other season of the year, but just now it's allowable."

"Why?" asked Van.

"I don't know, unless it's because there's so many of 'em, and they're all so fat. Won't Mother Porrance stare when she sees 'em!"

"She's seen blackbirds before."

"But not so many on one string. Besides, she thinks we're over at the academy."

"No, she don't. She's heard of the yellow-jackets by this time."

"What'll we do now?" asked Pat.

"Shoot at a mark with the carbine. Then we'll go home to dinner."

And so they did, but they were not quite at the end of their day's adventures. They had made fair practice with the carbine, only it had made their shoulders ache for them with the way it had of kicking.

"It's a mule of a gun," said Sol.

"Troth," said Pat, "I know of a man or two I'd like to set behind that thing, with the strongest kind of a cartridge in it. Oh, but wouldn't it land 'em!"

While they were discussing the virtues and vices of their several weapons they were slowly working their way homeward, and were, just now, passing by the great barnyard of the miller's farm. It was a big yard, but there was nothing alive in it that day except a pig or two, and some wandering hens and chickens.

"No game at all," said Van, but Sol suddenly exclaimed:

"Game! Van, do you see that spotted fox?"

"A fox! Where is he?"

"Fox, did yer say?" exclaimed Pat.

"None of your common foxes," gravely responded Sol, in a deep whisper, as he pointed across the barnyard. "That's one of the genuine spotted foxes. Fur's worth anything. They make ladies' muffs out of it. Van, you must go for that beast with your carbine. My gun might miss at that distance, and the bell-muzzle isn't loaded up."

"A fox?" grumbled Van. "It's a funny-looking fox. I never hunted foxes, but I've seen one, and pictures, too. They didn't look like that one."

"Of course not. Who ever said they did? Quick, now! Draw a good bead on him."

Van had rested his carbine on the barnyard fence, and was squinting through the sights, strong as were his doubts on the fox question.

It was a pretty animal, black and white, with plenty of bushy tail, and it seemed entirely unconscious of any danger as it perched on the corner of an old watering-trough and gazed eagerly at a fine brood of chickens at a little distance.

"Queer," muttered Sol, "that that fellow should venture out there in broad daylight. If Van hits him, I reckon we'd better run for it."

Just then the sharp crack of the carbine rang through the barnyard and the "spotted fox" rolled off from the trough, in token of the accuracy of Van's aim.

"I've killed him!"

"No, Van, hold on. I wouldn't get over the fence. I guess we don't want the skin of that fox. It's out of season for 'em. Winter's the only time to gather fur."

"But we can carry him home and show him?"

"No, Van, my boy. All this part of the valley'll know he's been killed soon enough. We needn't tell anybody we did it. Let's march on Bunkerville. Oh, but don't I wish the Hinckley boys had that fellow in their desk!"

"Phew!" suddenly exclaimed Pat Nolan. "It's a fox, is it? Do you s'pose I don't know what that smell is? 'Deed and I'm not so green as all that."

"Fox, indeed!" added Van.

"Some people call 'em skunks, that's a fact," remarked Sol, "and it may be that's the right name. Anyhow, you shot him for a fox, and if he was a skunk, why, that's his own lookout, not ours. I pity the next man that has to go to that barn for anything."

"Unless he's a bad cold in his head," suggested Pat, as he and the others hurried away in the direction of the village.

"Solomon," said Van Rivington, "you've sold me nicely, that's a fact, but if I don't play some kind of a fox game on you before we've done with it you may take my hat."

Sol gave a grin that did not make him look any handsomer, but he promised himself, in his

own mind, to keep a sharp lookout for the kind of "fox" Van spoke of.

"Wasn't it a mean sort of a thing to do?" asked the latter, as they walked along.

"No," said Sol. "Old Deacon Smith, the miller, is a curious old party. He won't let us boys go swimming on his pond. Now we've been saving his chickens for him and returning good for evil. We even left him our game. He's welcome to it, skin and all."

"Smell and all, you mean," said Pat.

"Just so. Now let's hurry, and we'll have some of our birds boiled. The rest of 'em 'll make a splendid potpie for Sunday's dinner. It 'll be a great help to poor Mrs. Porrance."

"She's kept us very well, so far."

"Always does, the first week; but she's an idea boys eat too much, and she does what she can to prevent it. Just you wait."

"I'll have enough to eat," said Van; "you see if I don't."

"That's the way I feel about it. The second week began to tell last year."

A grand morning the boys had had of it, for a short one, but if they supposed they had been

forgotten all that time they were mistaken, much as they had done for the future comfort of Deacon Smith and his family.

The latter were all away from home, on a bit of a visit, that day, and would not know anything about the "spotted fox" till their return.

They would surely know then.

In a village like Bunkerville, with such an academy in it, there could be no more general subject of chat than the daily goings on at the latter. There had, therefore, been a good deal of talk that morning. Even the weather had been neglected on account of the yellow-jackets.

Before noon everybody knew all about it, and just who had been stung and where.

The latter point was indeed one of absorbing interest, especially to the parties on whom the stings had been inflicted.

The part taken by Sol and Van did not by any means remain a secret.

More than one sage gossip wagged his or her head, as the case might be, and ominously remarked :

"Warned the doctor, did they? I'll warrant they knew a good deal more about it than they told him."

Perhaps they were right about that, but who was to guess or find out exactly how much they did know?

Whatever may have been his suspicions, Dr. Betts had no good reason for laying the blame on any one boy in particular. Certainly not on Bob and Joe Hinckley, more than on any other pair of youngsters.

He would have given a good deal to have gotten at the bottom of what seemed to him a very great mystery.

All the men to whom he applied for counsel, including the academy "trustees," laughed at any notion that Sol and Van had themselves done the mischief.

"If you've any doubt about it," remarked one old farmer, "jest you collar the next yaller-jackets' nest you come across and see how fur you'll kerry it. Ef you'll fetch it to my house I'll take keer on it fur ye."

Dr. Betts concluded not to try any such experiment, but he was pretty well satisfied in his

own mind that those insects had not invaded that schoolroom without human help.

Nor was he the only person who was puzzled by the circumstances of the case.

As soon as he could do so in safety that afternoon, Bob Hinckley made a flying visit to Van's desk.

There it was, as safe and sound as ever, to all appearances.

He tried the lid and found it securely locked.

"Took 'em out and locked it after 'em," he muttered to himself. "He's a queer fellow. Wonder if hornets and wasps won't sting him? I've heard tell of such. Well, we've missed it this time, and I'm stung so I can't but just see. Never mind; we'll get even with him and Sol Rogers yet. See if we don't."

If Bob's face looked a good deal the worse for wear, his brother Joe was even more badly off. Whatever other plans they might have on hand for the discomfort of Sol and his friends would be compelled to wait a while.

That very day the latter arranged to have new locks put on their desks, so that they would not be so easily opened the next time a trick was up.

When the boys got home with their birds, however, they did indeed astonish Mrs. Porrance.

"Blackbirds! I never saw such a lot before. Where did you get them, Sol?"

"Shot 'em. That is, most of 'em. The rest were scared to death by Pat's big gun. You never saw such a gun as that for blackbirds."

"I should say not. Where on earth did you get it?"

"It's one his grandfather had at the battle of Bunker Hill. I was there myself and know it's the same gun. Only it's grown a little."

"Hope it won't grow any more, then. But what are we to do with the birds?"

"Why, broil some now, and potpie the rest for Sunday."

"That'll do. I didn't know you had so much sense. Only you and Pat must pick and clean them."

"All right. We'll show Van how, and then he'll know more than he did before."

And the programme so set forth was carried out elegantly well.

There may be those who would turn up their noses at broiled blackbirds, but they are poor

people who have not the magnificent appetites of those three boys.

That was a grand dinner, that "birds on toast treat," as Sol Rogers called it, but it was a trifle later than usual. That, however, was of less consequence, considering the fact that there was to be no school that afternoon.

There, indeed, came in a sort of a difficulty.

A whole afternoon and no arrangement made for doing anything in particular with it.

"Do?" asked Mrs. Porrance, in her hard, practical way. "I'll tell you one thing you can do."

"What's that?" said Sol.

"Go back to Martin with that old gun and tell him to make a new one of it. Cut off the bell-muzzle and put a percussion lock on it. Then it'll be good for something."

So the widow knew something about guns.

The respect of her boarders for her went up several degrees. They had scarcely dreamed of such a thing, but Pat exclaimed:

"'Dade, ma'am, I'll do that same."

"Do it," she said. "And Van, you take

back that carbine. It'll never be of any use. A ball from it would knock a squirrel all to bits."

The boys looked at one another and thought of the sad fate of the poor chipmunk, but they said nothing about him.

After dinner they made the best of their way to old Martin's, skilfully dodging the curious questioners who beset them on their way.

"Alter it?" said the gunsmith. "Of course I can. But it'll cost you two or three dollars. What put that into your head?"

"Mrs. Porrance," replied Pat. "And I'll pay that much. Only so you make a good gun of it for me."

"It's mighty little that old woman don't know," muttered Martin, as he turned the old gun over in his hand. "But you'll all know her better before spring comes."

"You know her?" asked Van.

"Known her ever since she was knee-high. She had her own way pretty much when she was young, and she's had it, on an average, ever since. Tell you what, my young friend, I'll make a gun out of that. How many blackbirds did you say you killed?"

"Over a hundred. Didn't count, exactly. Two shots apiece. Mine were double," replied Sol.

"Well, allowing for lying, there must have been a good many."

"Lying? Ask Mrs. Porrance."

"Don't know but what I will," dryly responded Martin. "I don't mean to say it couldn't be done. I've seen something like it at a pigeon-roost."

"I've heard of them," exclaimed Van. "Oh, but wouldn't I like to see one!—if I had a good gun."

"Sure to be one somewhere in the mountains this fall. Only you'd never go so far."

"Don't know about that," said Sol, soberly. "There's no telling what I wouldn't do for my country."

"Or your dinner. Well, Pat, I'll have your new shooting-iron done some time next week. I'll put in a good sight for you. She'll shoot as well as ever, only she won't be quite so long, that's all."

"Less iron to carry, too," said Sol.

"And easier to load," said Van. "I must have a gun, but I'll wait till I hear from home."

He felt almost sure, in his own mind, that his next letter would give him a fit of the blues, but he thought of his mother, and sternly turned away his head from the tempting array of double and single barrels in old Martin's cases.

It was a "tight place" for a boy like Van to be in, and very likely his father had made a sharp guess at the truth of the matter. He had been a boy once, long ago, as most men have, only too many of them forget it. More's the pity for them, and for the boys they may happen to have under their control.

The whole afternoon could not be spent at old Martin's, nevertheless, and when Sol and his friends found themselves once more in the street they were half way at a loss what to do, until Sol's eyes fell upon a great black and white sign across the eaves of a tumble-down wooden building.

"The Bunkerville *Clarion*! Come on, boys. We've got some items for little Rickards. We'll just immortalize ourselves."

Van and Pat caught the notion and followed, but without a very clear idea of what they meant to do.

It was a dingy room enough that they climbed to, up a rickety flight of steps outside the building. It must have been made for a bedroom, but it opened now into a larger and still dirtier one, that contained the types and presses of the *Clarion*.

"Once a week," said Sol, as they went up; "and weak every time. It prints the poetry for the academy young ladies. Van, I believe you could write poetry."

"I'd rather catch pickerel."

Just then they were entering the editor's room, and there he was, the genius of Bunkerville, a thin, black-eyed, long-haired youth, who had evidently all run to brains, for he had no body worth mentioning.

"Mr. Rickards," said Sol, with the air of an old acquaintance, although he had never before spoken to him, "allow me to introduce my friend, Mr. Rivington, of New York. Mr. Patrick Nolan, also of New York. We've some interesting items for the *Clarion*."

"Items? Ah! Anything about the yellow-jackets? Bless me, yes. You are the chaps that discovered them. Now, I'd like to hear the truth of that mysterious affair."

"First, Mr. Rickards, we've a contribution for your sporting column. No names need be mentioned; you can say that the biggest string of pickerel ever brought into Bunkerville was caught in two hours in Blue Pond by two young gentlemen of the academy."

"Number? Weight?"

"Exactly. Put them in to suit yourself. We're not at all particular. You know the size of the last fish story. Of course we could not think of dictating to a man of your genius."

Rickards laid down his pen and looked at Sol with the air of a man who was afraid he was being made fun of; but that young gentleman solemnly went on:

"That'll do for the fish, but Mr. Nolan and myself shot one hundred and fifty blackbirds this morning without missing a shot."

"What a lie!"

"Come right down to Mrs. Porrance's, and we'll show you the birds, all but what we ate for dinner. You can say we knocked 'em over at two shots, as we did, or you can leave that out, just as you please."

"Do you mean it's true?"

Sol condescended to give the particulars of the bird business, and Mr. Rickards concluded that he could dress the story up for publication.

"Now for the murder!" exclaimed Sol, with a wide grin. "Can I rely on your secrecy?"

"Murder?"

"Yes. By Mr. Rivington, of a large spotted fox in the barnyard of Mr. Smith, the miller."

"The old curmudgeon! A spotted fox! I wish it had been a skunk."

"That's just what it was. If you don't believe it, go down there and smell."

"Hurra for that, then!" shouted the limp and diminutive editor, in a hoarse and croaking voice, as he sprang from his chair. "Won't I give the deacon a benefit? Oh, no, perhaps I won't. And then, again, perhaps I will. Now, Mister—— What's—your—name?"

"Rogers—Solomon Rogers, Esquire."

"What about the yellow-jackets?"

Sol had no objection to a rehearsal of that affair, but he wound up with an assertion of his profound conviction that "the trustees did it."

"The trustees? Are they crazy?"

"No, sir. Rickards, my dear fellow, they did it out of an old spite they have against poor little Dr. Betts. They've been feeding up that swarm of stingers all summer, if the truth were known. You print it, anyway, and see how many of 'em 'll come to see you."

"I should say they would. It would make a sensation. Not a doubt of it. My young friends, I was in despair when you came in. The *Clarion* needed one column more. Needed local items. Needed something to stir up the village. I can do it now. If ever you want anything in my line, come to me."

"Come and see my new breech-loader," said Sol. "It's the most elegant weapon ever seen in Bunkerville."

"I'll do it."

"And say we are ready to shoot with any other pair in the country."

"I'll do it."

"But don't mention names. Make it a mystery; like the spotted fox."

"I'll do it. Good-afternoon. What an editor that boy would make!"

So thought Sol's friends as he led them down

the rickety stairs to the street, but he turned, when they reached the sidewalk, to say :

“Now, boys, let’s go for our books. If you and I, Van, teach Pat all the Greek and Latin we know, we’ll get him out of that lower class in short order.”

“Will you do it?” exclaimed Pat.

“We’ll try,” said Van. “You’re the one’ll have the hard work.”

“It’s not that I’m afraid of.”

And so, like good fellows as they were, they gave up any further idea of outdoor fun that day and evening, to give their associate a lift. Queer teachers they were, but Pat was no ordinary scholar, and he got ahead at a rate that surprised himself as much as it did the others.

CHAPTER VII

A MYSTERY AT THE CABIN

MRS. PORRANCE was a remarkable woman in more ways than one, and she was by no means likely to lose sight of her own interests in her management of her boarders, whether or not she might choose to have a personal liking for them.

The next day was Saturday, and with it came, as Sol said, "a breaking out of Porrance."

He and Van were discussing plans for the day, in their own room, from the time they woke up till the bell rang for breakfast.

That meal passed about as usual, except that Pat Nolan wore a somewhat serious face and was silent.

After it was over he marched up-stairs behind his friends, and the first words he said after the door closed behind them, was :

"Mrs. Porrance's ponies have come."

"Are they good ones?" asked Van.

"Tip top, and as black as your hat. I'm to tend them."

"That won't be hard work. I'd like to take a hand at it. There's nothing else so nice as a horse."

"So there isn't. But that's not the whole of it."

"What then?"

"They brought a big load of corn from the farm."

"To feed 'em with? All right. It's good feed for horses."

"How is it for boys?"

"Boys? I don't know. What do you mean?"

"She says I'm to shell a pile of it to-day and take it to the mill to be ground. Did you ever shell corn?"

"No. It's for meal, I s'pose. Pancakes and johnny-cake, and all that."

"Yes, all that. But what does she want with so much? The wood-pile's getting into first-rate condition. She says shelling corn is easier than splitting wood."

"Boys," interrupted Sol, in a deeply injured tone, "it's come."

"What's come?" asked Van.

"The age of corn. We had it last winter, and we had it bad. But it didn't set in as early as this. It's an awful thing."

"Awful! Is it?"

"You wait and see. Poor Patrick Nolan! How he will suffer! And what a time we'll all have! Corn! It's a great fruit. Anyhow, I'm glad the ponies are here to help. It's a comfort that we won't have to eat the whole crop. Corn is plenty and cheap this year. The crop is remarkable."

"Is shelling corn hard work?" asked Pat.

"Not if you do it for fun and don't have too much of it. But I don't want to make you feel bad. I'm down in the mouth myself."

"You! Why?"

"Because we meant you to go with us to-day. Now it's all knocked on the head. Let's go out and have a look at the ponies. Come on, Van."

That Saturday, indeed, turned out the dullest kind of day, and so did several days that followed on the heels of it. Pat Nolan began to discover that, what between the wood-pile, the corn-bin, errands, the ponies and his books, his

life in Bunkerville was not likely to be an idle one.

"Troth, and if I'm only earning the half of me board now," he said to Sol and Van, "how'd I go to work to earn the whole of it?"

Mrs. Porrance had assured him that morning that "work was good for him," and Miss Almira had added, "And you would not wish to eat the bread of idleness."

"The corn bread," Pat had muttered between his teeth, and he made up his mind to have a consultation with his friends on the subject. "I'm to go to the mill the day after school, and bring home the other grist. I'm takin' a bigger one with me. Corn-time is here, you may depend on that."

"You'll take the ponies?"

"Of course. Do you s'pose I'd carry the bag on me back? It's the long wagon I'll have."

"We'll join you, then. Did you know the *Clarion* was printed yesterday?"

"Was it? Does it take that long to print a paper here?"

"Once a week and weakly. Didn't I tell you? It's two days late this time, because the paper to

print it on was slow in coming. We'll go for a lot of 'em while you're hitching up after school."

Rickards had indeed been in hot water about his publication that week, even after getting his "items" and setting them up, but it was not the first time such a thing had happened, and it hurt his feelings less than if he had been running a different sort of paper.

Hot water was scarcely the word for the mess he found himself in when the *Clarion* was scattered around Bunkerville, and there was a steady run on him for extra copies all the afternoon.

"The trustees, indeed! To think of his laying the hornets at their door."

"A joke on Dr. Betts!"

"A hundred blackbirds in succession, without a miss!"

"What an awful fish story!"

"A member of Deacon Smith's own family murdered in his barnyard. Every soul that's been to the mill this week knows what he means by that. Why, it's a libel. Hope the deacon'll take the law on him."

And that was by no means the end of the unlucky editor's offending. He had printed six

different pieces of poetry, but there was no telling how many he had left out, for the *Clarion* was not a large sheet, and it "filled up" considerably with advertisements, so that there was sometimes scarcely room for the entire genius of Bunkerville.

Alas for him, that among the slighted ones was no less a person than Miss Almira Porrance, curls and all!

That was how it came to pass, late in the afternoon, when the male and female students were lingering in squads on the academy green, and Pat Nolan was hitching up to go to the mill, and Sol and Van were hurrying back from the printing-office with their fresh literature, that both Almira and her mother were too much occupied to so much as look through the windows at what might be going on out of doors.

Almira's face was deeply flushed.

"I'll never send him another. It wouldn't have taken up much more than half a column, and here he's gone and printed six others and left mine out. It was ten times as good as any of these. He's given every one of 'em a puff, too. He's a complete idiot. Knows no more

about true poetry than ma's black ponies. And she doesn't sympathize with me. She never did. There she sits now, actually laughing."

That was only a small part of what Almira had to say, but it was true about the widow. Mrs. Porrance was laughing.

Not a trivial, commonplace, empty cackle, like that of some people, but a deep, noiseless, grim laugh, that meant something.

"Oh, those boys!" she muttered. "But that's mainly Sol's work, most likely. Didn't his mother ever tell him it was wicked to lie? Probably Rickards himself put on a little. That is, if Sol Rogers needed any help to make a big story out of a little one. There, I wonder if that isn't Pat Nolan starting for the mill. He never needs to be told twice. I declare, if those two young rascals haven't jumped in with him. Too late, now. I ought to have been looking out."

So she ought, if she meant Pat to go alone, for he was sending the ponies down the road at a pace that just suited the lively, restive little Canadians, and there was no telling what mischief might turn up before they got back.

That is, it might have been difficult but for Van Rivington.

"Look here, boys," remarked that sage young counselor, as they rattled along, "we must behave ourselves this time or we'll never be able to borrow the ponies when we want them."

"Bring 'em back safe and sound," said Sol; "but they need a little exercise. The load's nothing."

"What's a few bags of corn?" asked Pat. "Didn't I shell it?"

"And won't we have to eat it?"

It was a tiptop drive, anyhow, and, when they reached the door of the mill, there was fat, red-faced old Deacon Smith standing in it, mopping his forehead with a red handkerchief.

"How d'ye do, deacon?" sung out Sol Rogers. "Is Mrs. Porrance's grist ready?"

"All ready."

"And here's another one," said Pat.

"I hope she's savin' some to plant."

"Deacon," exclaimed Sol, as the miller came to the wagon, "would you like to look at the *Clarion*, just out?"

"I never take it, my young friend. It's a vile

sheet. No respect for anybody. No news, no nothing. I don't mind looking at it though, while Dan's changing your grists."

And look at it he did, Sol taking care to hand it to him so that his attention should be drawn first to the "local column."

Redder and redder grew the face of the miller as his now eager eyes hurried along the libelous lines of the *Clarion*.

"Murdered! A member of my own family? Oh, how I wish I knew who shot that skunk! I'll bet a thousand dollars it was Rickards himself. The scoundrel! Why, boys, you can smell it now. It's been perfectly dreadful. There's a ton of hay in that barn that'll never get over it."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed Sol; but Van Rivington's face wore even a more serious look.

"Mr. Smith," suggested Pat Nolan, "I thought that kind of a baste was bad for poulthry?"

"So they are. Kill lots of 'em."

"Then why wasn't it a good thing for ye to get rid of him?"

"So it would be in any other way. And now I'm to be laughed at in the papers about it. Oh, if I don't get even with him!"

"Deacon Smith," said Sol, "do you want to know how to shut up Rickards?"

"Well, how?"

"Subscribe for the *Clarion* and put in an advertisement of your mill. He'd puff you blue and gold."

"Subscribe for it? Have it come to my house?"

"Poetry in it, deacon. Lots of good things. Maybe I'll write for it myself now and then."

"You? You young vagabond!"

"Be careful, deacon; I've some tame skunks at home. What if I should turn 'em all loose in your barnyard?"

"Don't talk back——"

"No, deacon, no. I never talk back. I don't know what I might do if I were old and fat and red-faced and bald-headed, and so mean I wouldn't let the boys go a-swimming in my mill-pond."

The miller was a great man in his own opinion, and he could scarcely believe his ears. A mere boy, to chaff him in such a fashion!

But Dan, his broad-backed helper, had tumbled a couple of heavy bags of meal into the wagon.

After four sacks of Indian corn had been duly landed on the ground beside it, Pat Nolan, who had never loosened his hold on the reins of his ponies, now suddenly gave them a starting chirrup.

"You scamp! If I had my hands on you!"

"No, Deacon Smith," said Sol, calmly, "your little hands were never made for that. Better sit down and enjoy your *Clarion*. It's a good paper and looks out for the neighborhood news. I'll tell Mr. Rickards you sent him your love. He'll send you the *Clarion* regularly. Price two dollars a year. Printed once a week if nothing happens. Good-bye."

Even Van and Pat were learning something new about their friend as they listened.

"There's mischief in him," thought Van.

"Sure, and he's safe to get the two of us into scrapes enough, if we let him," chuckled Pat to himself. And it may be neither of them thought any the less of Sol on that account.

The drive home was a lively one, but they carefully bore in mind Van Rivington's caution, and Mrs. Porrance only nodded her grizzled head approvingly, as the ponies were wheeled in per-

fect safety through the wide gate, and down the lane toward the barn, stopping to deliver the meal-bags opposite the kitchen door.

At supper-time that evening Miss Almira more than hinted that she knew the source of the remarkable items of news in the *Clarion*, but Sol parried her remarks with a graphic account of the manner and spirit in which Deacon Smith had received his share of Rickards' editorial work.

"I do not wonder he is indignant," emphatically replied Miss Almira; "the attack upon him was unfeeling. That fellow, Rickards, is destitute of taste and judgment. He is not fit to edit a newspaper."

"Puts in altogether too much poetry, and such like trash," remarked her mother, with a cast-iron smile.

Sol looked at Van and grinned as he added :

"Mr. Rivington is fond of poetry."

"Is he?" asked Almira.

"Indeed he is. I'm trying to encourage him to write some. I know he could if he'd try. Patrick Nolan, now—Miss Almira, did Patrick ever show you any of his poetry?"

"He write poetry?"

"Why not, then? I'll repeat one of his verses :

" ' Wood-pile, sawbuck,
 Cornerib and bin,
 If I burned 'em all up
 Would it be a sin ? ' "

There, now, what do you think of that? Better'n anything ever was printed in the *Clarion*."

"Hold your tongue," whispered Pat, almost angrily. "You know I never made that rhyme, or any other."

"Never mind, Patrick," Mrs. Porrance was beginning, when there came a great knock at the front door, and a moment later the expressman announced :

"A package for Mr. Rivington."

"That's me. Anything to pay?"

"No. Prepaid from New York. Sign the receipt, that's all."

There was something in the outer appearance of that package which made Van's fingers tremble as he wrote his name, but Sol shouted :

"Just like mine, by jingo ! Van, if somebody

hasn't sent you a gun. I say, whose life did you save, I'd like to know?"

"Another gun in the house? Oh, dear me!" gasped Miss Almira; but her mother growled at her:

"Nonsense! He'd better have a good one than any old affair he can pick up in Bunkerville. Think of that carbine. It wasn't even good for blackbirds."

Sensible woman.

So at least thought Van, for he said:

"I'll open it right here."

And before Almira could make up her mind whether or not it would pay to scream, the job was half done.

Sol Rogers was busy with the other half, and another moment told them they were not mistaken.

"Just like mine. Cartridges the same size," shouted Sol. "When mine are used up I can steal yours."

"It's from my father!"

That was all Van could say, just then, and he put the letter he had found tied to the gun case carefully into his breast-pocket, to

be read through when he should get to his room.

“Oh, won’t we have a time!” sung Sol, as he almost danced around the room, and Pat Nolan could scarcely help wishing his own weapon a double-barreled breech-loader.

“Never mind,” he said; “mine’s as heavy with one barrel as yours is with two, and it takes three times the powder and shot to load her.”

“Van,” said Sol, “now you can go for spotted foxes all day and all night.”

“Yes, and for blackbirds, too.”

“And if you shoot a chipmunk, there’ll be something left of him to bring home.”

There was more work for Pat at the wood-pile and at the barn; but the other two boys hurried up-stairs with the new prize.

They found, on comparison, that their respective guns were really of the same guage and make, but Van’s was, if anything, the handsomer of the two.

“We’ll know ’em apart,” said Sol. “Shall you try yours first on a pane of glass as I did?”

“No; but I move we go for the woods on Saturday.”

"Squirrels? It's early for 'em, but we might find a few."

"Anything and everything. That is, anything in the game line."

"No cows, Van."

"Nor polecats."

"I don't know about that. It might depend on who owned the barnyard. If it was my dear friend, the deacon, now, I wouldn't answer for it."

Then Van got into a corner and read his letter, and even Sol Rogers had enough of common sense not to bother him.

It was a grand, good letter, just such as a wise father would write to a son in whom he had any amount of solid confidence. Such fathers are very apt to have boys whom they can trust with guns, or almost anything else which is a splendid thing for the boys as well as for the fathers.

The next day was Friday, and what Sol Rogers called "Smith's grist" began to make its appearance.

Mrs. Porrance knew how to make johnny-cake, however, and sour milk and so forth cost her absolutely nothing. Pat and Van, therefore, in

consideration of the rich maple syrup which came on with it, were disposed to think well of their first trial of the corn question.

"What's your complaint, Sol?" asked Van. "Seems to me it's good."

"So it is. I like it myself. So do I like the Constitution of the United States. They're both good. You wait awhile."

The hasty-pudding and milk they had at noon was also good; the very best of its kind.

Even Sol was compelled to own up as much as that. He could not even find any special fault with the corn-cakes that came on for supper.

In fact, Sol gave his friends a surprise over those corn-cakes. He praised them extravagantly and openly at the very table, and then he wound up with:

"Mrs. Porrance, old Martin says Pat's gun 'll be finished this evening. You'll want him to go with us into the woods to-morrow, of course. We'll bring you home something nice for Sunday's dinner."

"I don't know about that. He will have some errands to do."

"Of course he will. Van and I'll help him do

them after supper. These are the best corn-cakes I ever ate in all my life."

"It might be managed——"

"Mrs. Porrance," exclaimed Van, "I'll help Pat with his errands, so he can go hunting with us. But can't we have some more of that beautiful johnny-cake for breakfast, such as you gave us this morning?"

"Certainly."

"And won't you write out the recipe for me to send home? That and the corn-cakes?"

"Of course I will. On the whole, I don't know but what I'll have to let Patrick go for once. He killed most of the blackbirds."

"He's a wonderful shot, Mrs. Porrance. We might fall in with a flock of squirrels——"

"Squirrels!" exclaimed Almira. "They don't fly."

"Don't they? Well, you know more about birds than I do. Pat is to go with us, then, Mrs. Porrance?"

"If all the errands are done," said Mrs. Porrance. "I do not wish to be hard on him."

"Thank you, ma'am," enthusiastically exclaimed Pat Nolan, who had held in as long as

he could. "Now for me errands and me new gun. Won't I go for all there is!"

"Spotted foxes and all," gravely added Sol Rogers.

But all three of them were too much excited over what they rightly considered their "victory" to stay for any more cakes. All Mrs. Porrance had to do was to give her directions, and never had she known her several errands and "chores" done up in such marvelously short order as they were that evening.

The sun was scarcely down when all was over, and the boys were on their way back from Old Martin's with Pat's prize.

It did not look like the same gun at all, and nobody need have been ashamed of being seen with that remarkable weapon over his shoulder. Long, indeed, it still was, and heavy, but the good-natured gunsmith had evidently put into it the entire value of the three dollars he charged Pat for his work.

"She'll not burst with you, and that's one comfort," he had said to Pat; "and you can put in all the powder and shot you feel like. Did she kick, the other day?"

"Not a great deal, but some."

"She won't now so much. I've seamed her out clean and bright, and the lock's a good one. If you get any good out of her, come in and tell me how she carries."

"I will that. We're bound to bag something to-morrow."

"Then I'll tell you something worth while. Most people don't know it, but a feller was in here to-day from up nigh Ragged Gap——"

"That's ten miles," said Sol.

"So it is, but you can get a ride on somebody's wagon, if you're wide awake. The pigeons ain't makin' a roost yet; it's too early. But they're flyin' good out nigh the Gap. Mebbe you can sight somethin' else out that way. It's an awful rugged place, and there isn't many folks ever goes there."

"Just you give us a notion of the road," exclaimed Sol Rogers, "and if we don't make all Bunkerville gape when we come back!"

"You won't get in any too early, but perhaps you'll get something better than blackbirds. It's worth trying for."

The boys did very little reading of any kind

after they got to their rooms, and most of their sleeping hours were spent in wild dreams of game and Ragged Gaps.

It was only the part of wisdom for Mrs. Porrance to give her boarders an early breakfast that Saturday morning. It does not take long to make and bake johnny-cake, and they—well, they had been up and dressed since before daylight, and all their preparations were more than completed.

It did not seem to Pat Nolan as if that big gun of his weighed three ounces. And then, with its new lock and sight, and all that, it was “such a beauty of a gun!” He did not envy Sol and Van a particle, with their breech-loading gimcracks of double-barrels.

“We mustn’t tire ourselves out, boys,” said Van, as they marched away from the house. “Old Martin said we might catch a ride.”

“Wait till we turn off into the north road,” said Sol; “then, if a wagon passes us, we’ll go for it.”

It was not right away, however, that any vehicle whatever came along, and when one did,

Sol drew a long face with his first glance at the floury coat of the driver.

"It's Deacon Smith's team, and that's his man, Dan, bound for a load of buckwheat. They raise lots of it over towards the mountains. It's about the only thing 'll grow there. Hullo! he's stopping for something."

Dan, just before he reached the three pedestrians, had discovered something wrong about his harness, and not only halted, but 'sprang out to make corrections.

"Boys," said Van, quietly, "while I'm talking to him you both walk back and get into the wagon."

Then, stepping towards the miller's "help," with the easy manner of the complete little gentleman he was, he remarked:

"Fine morning, sir. Heard of any game out this way?"

"Mornin'. Game? Wall, no. May be a few pigeons; now 'n then a squir'l. Nothin' of much 'count jist yit. Bime-by, arter frost, chance'll be better."

He fussed away at a harness-buckle while he was speaking, and by the time he got it fixed to

suit him he was provided with something else to speak of.

"Look a-here, you; git eout o' that wagin. No foolin' now."

"Oh," said Van, "it's all right, Daniel. I told them to get in."

"You did, did ye?"

"Yes. It's ten cents apiece, you know. I'll pay for all three of us. It's all right."

"Thirty cents. Wonder what the deacon'd say? He jist hates that there ugly-mugged youngster."

But while Dan was pondering the matter, Van stepped forward and sprang lightly into the wagon, taking his place on the driver's seat, with:

"Come on, Dan; we're ready."

Slowly, and as if a bit of a joke were in it, all began to dawn upon him, and a broad grin spread across Dan's mealy face, as he clambered back to his seat without another word, except:

"Reckon you'll deu, you will."

"Of course we will," said Van. "Did you ever see a neater gun than that?"

Whatever remaining objection the miller's

helper may have had disappeared in "shooting talk," and the boys were six or seven miles further on their way before Sol sang out:

"Here we are, Van. Yonder's the Gap."

"It's a good five miles away."

"So it is. We're not going there. Here's the woods old Martin told us of. To the westward, on the slope."

"And a consumed rough one you'll find it," said Dan. "Thar's deer and b'ar killed in them notches most every winter. 'Tain't no fool of a job gettin' up there arter the first heavy snow. Neow it ain't."

"Guess it won't be very hard now, anyway," said Sol, as he sprang from the wagon.

Van took out his three dimes in a very matter-of-course and business-like way, and Dan put them in his pocket with the air of a man who thought he had made that much more than he had any right to expect. So he had, very easily, too, and thirty cents was more of a sum up in that neighborhood than it would have been in the great city those dimes came from.

The boys had been saved a good long pull,

however, considering what they had to carry in the way of guns and ammunition.

"There's one thing about it," said Sol, as they struck out of the road, and Dan whipped up his horses around the turn to the eastward, "I guess we won't have many more fences to climb."

"Sickliest corn-field I've seen since I came here," said Van; "but there are some crows."

"Just out of shot. That's always the style with crows. They know all about guns and how far they'll carry."

"Guns like yours," said Pat Nolan; "but what do they know about old Revolutionary iron? Hold on, Sol."

"You'll never do it."

"Let him try 'em," said Van. "There's five of 'em together on the limb of that dead tree."

"Caw, caw, caw," came down to their ears on the wind, as Pat braced himself and raised his long barrel.

"Bang!"

The roar of it was as loud as ever, but it did not seem to kick much, and no less than three of the black-coated gentry came fluttering to the ground.

"Hurroo! Got 'em!" shouted Pat, as he sprang forward.

"Bring 'em in," said Sol. "We must carry home all the game we get. Mrs. Porrance won't like it if we come home empty-handed."

Just then he heard a loud report behind him.

"What's that, Van?"

"'Tisn't a spotted fox this time. I saw him peek over the knoll."

"A woodchuck. What a fat one! Van, our luck's begun. It'll be an elephant next."

A woodchuck it was, and Van's first shot with his new gun had been a good one.

"Three crows and a woodchuck," soliloquized Sol, a minute or so later. "Who says there's any danger of a famine in Bunkerville? Woodchucks are best on toast, but a crow should be eaten raw."

"Feathers and all?" said Pat.

"What's a crow without his feathers?"

"Faith, I never saw one that way. They mostly wear 'em."

"That's what gives 'em such a dark complexion," remarked Sol, as he squinted eagerly around for something on which to try his own skill.

Nothing turned up right away, and he and the others were shortly picking their way through the bushy and tangled "second-growth" at the bases of the ranges of high, bald hills, through which "Ragged Gap" gave a gateway.

They were a sort of spur of the White Mountains, and it was the general fashion to call them "mountain," although there was little about them to remind anybody of the Alps or the Andes.

Sharp eyes like those of the three boys were not likely to miss many things, and there had been no hunting done in that neighborhood for a good while. So it was not long before, as Sol expressed it, he "began to make up his bag."

First came a red-headed woodpecker. Poor fellow, he was making too much noise on a hollow tree. Then a red squirrel, whose curiosity brought him within danger. Next an unlucky yellow-hammer, and Sol said :

"I wouldn't have shot that fellow but for my regard for Mrs. Porrance. I'll tell her it's a wild duck."

He was busily putting in a fresh cartridge as he spoke, and Van silently motioned to Pat

Nolan to look up, raising his own gun as he did so.

A moment more and they fired, almost together, Van putting in his second barrel.

Sol Rogers was a quick one.

He never looked at his friends, but his gun was up in an instant, and while a dozen or so of wild pigeons came tumbling down around him, from the effects of their shots, he was sending "right and left" after the same well scared flock.

Half as many more fluttering birds dropped here and there among the scattered trees, and Pat remarked :

"Them's the ones we wounded. Of course they flew a little."

"Pat, do you mean to insinuate that I didn't shoot 'em?"

"Did you fire, indeed? Maybe, then, you helped a bit. Nothing hurts a pigeon worse than to be shot twice."

"Now, Pat!"

"Oh," said Van, "we'll let Sol claim a pigeon or two to hang beside his woodpecker. He can tell Mrs. Porrance they're all ducks."

It is easy enough work shooting pigeons, and

before long Pat knocked a gray squirrel out of a high tree.

Still, there was walking to be done and the game to carry, and so it was work as well as play, till the shadows told them it was already past noon, and their stomachs agreed entirely with the shadows.

So did Van's watch, and Sol's.

"We'll cook our own dinner," said Sol. "Hullo, there's some kind of a house. Let's go for it."

Queer place for a house, up there on the barren hillside, and a poor sort of thing it was, built of logs and with a rude stone chimney on the outside.

The nearer they came the queerer it looked, nor could they discern a sign of human occupation.

Mainly because there was none, for the house was empty.

Still, there was the fireplace when they entered, and there was a spring of cold water near the door, and there was nothing at all to prevent them from kindling a fire and broiling as many pigeons as they could eat.

Grand fun it was cooking for themselves in that lonely, deserted hut.

"Who could ever have lived here?" exclaimed Sol. "There isn't so much as a corn-field or a henhouse."

"More by token," said Pat. "Mrs. Porrance says I'm to take care of her henhouse from this on."

"It's a good one, Patrick. Her hens lay all winter, but we won't get many of the eggs, unless she puts them into corncake."

"Boys," said Van, holding up something in his hand, "do you see that?"

"Yes," said Sol; "what is it?"

"Slag."

"What's that?"

"It's what's left in melting metal. I know about such things. My father's got a tip-top mineral cabinet."

"No mines hereabouts."

"Can't help that——"

Just then Van darted across the one room of the log-house and picked up a piece of something white.

"Now I know. Boys, can you keep a secret?"

"Of course we can," said Pat.

"Keep a secret?" exclaimed Sol. "It's what I was made for."

"Then we'll get away from this as fast as we can, and I'll tell you what we've found."

They had eaten a very good bit of a dinner, and were nearly ready to go, so that they lost nothing by it, but the secret Van explained to them when they got back in the woods made their eyes open.

"What'll we do about it?" asked Sol.

"Dr. Betts—we'll have a talk with him," said Van.

"He's a good little fellow. I hope it won't scare him. Why, Van, it beats the hornets' nest."

"Well, then, it's getting late. I move we hunt our way down toward the road."

It was not necessary to go the way they came. A pretty clearly marked "wood road," that seemed not to have been used recently, led from the old log-house down the rugged hillside.

Still, as they went along, they picked off several squirrels, red and gray, and a few more wild pigeons, to take the place of those they had

eaten, and when they came out at last, not far from where they had parted with Dan and his wagon, Sol broke out with :

“We might carry our game in to Bunkerville, but not with that secret on top of it. It’s too much.”

“Too much entirely,” said Pat.

“Seems like an awful long trip to make,” said Van, “and the sun isn’t an hour high.”

“We’ve got to do it, though,” said Sol. “Oh, for a wagon and a miller’s man! I say, Van, there’s a horse.”

“But no wagon.”

“Nor harness,” said Pat.

“That shows that he’s nobody’s horse. Van, he’d be better off if he was nearer Bunkerville.”

A forlorn-looking pony he was, feeding lazily along by the roadside, and offering no sort of resistance to being caught.

“What’ll we do with him?” asked Pat. “We’ve no halter, even.”

“He’ll never run away. Come, now, let’s load our game and guns on him and set him a-going.”

“His owner might come along.”

“Owner? He’s too poor for that. It’s only

your rich ponies have owners. We're not stealing him. We're trying to drive him home, poor beast!"

The string of somewhat motley game, pigeons, woodchuck, yellow-hammer, squirrels, crows, and woodpecker were slung across the pony's thin ribs, with the guns on top and a boy on each side to steady the load, and then Sol Rogers marched ahead, holding the end of the "halter" he had rigged up with a piece of twine, and the march began.

There was not enough of spirit left in that wayside pony to make any resistance, so, of course, there was not enough to do more than the slowest kind of walking. It was a good deal after dark, therefore, before he and three tired boys halted in the outskirts of Bunkerville.

"It would be stealing to take him any further," said Sol.

"How so?" asked Van.

"Why, we found him by the side of the road, out of town. That's just where we'll leave him. He's used to taking care of himself."

"We ought to feed him," said Pat. "Sure an' he's worked for us."

"Exactly," said Sol. "We're just at the back side of Deacon Smith's big pasture lot now. There's the bars. Plenty of good grass and water. Deacon Smith's a good man. I'm glad to give him a chance to help the poor."

"It's as poor a pony as I ever saw," said Van.

"Then let down the bars, Patrick. Eat all you can, pony, my boy. Smith'll never miss it. Now, boys, for Mrs. Porrance and some supper."

The pony certainly could have had no objection to the quarters assigned him, and the bars were carefully put up behind him.

"The deacon'll wonder how he did that same," said Pat.

"Patrick," exclaimed Sol, "do you suppose a good man like Deacon Smith'd grudge a little grass and water to a fellow-creature?"

Mrs. Porrance had expected a somewhat late return of her young boarders from their day's hunt, and so had not wasted any considerable time or thought in "waiting" for them.

That was why neither she nor Almira was at the dining-room window when they came

through the front gate, and Sol had a chance to say :

“There’s my pigeons, Van. Give me the woodchuck. Pat, give me the crows. You’ve most of the squirrels, Van. Hide ’em there by the window. Now let’s go in.”

Van plumped the birds down by the window and then said, as they entered :

“I’ll take your gun up-stairs, Sol, while you carry the game in. I’ll be right down.”

That was kind of Van, and he and Pat were back in the dining-room by the time Mrs. Porrance had heard Sol’s first account of the day’s doings in Ragged Gap, and was beginning to comment on the game.

“A gray squirrel. Only one !”

“Such a remarkably fat and handsome squirrel,” said Sol. “Look at his tail !”

“We’ll cook that for you. Three red ones ——”

“Reddest kind,” said Sol.

“One yellow-hammer. What’s that good for ?”

“It’s a rare bird,” said Sol.

“And that’s a woodchuck ! Why, Sol Rogers, a woodchuck ! And what for did you bring

home those crows? A pretty Sunday dinner you've laid out. Crows!"

"Crows, indeed!" exclaimed Almira. "Common black crows."

"Do you really mean to say they are crows?" asked Van, as he came in. "Now, Sol has been insisting on it they were pigeons, all the way home. I told him he was wrong."

"And it's crows they are, are they?" inquired Pat Nolan, with a queer look on his face; but just as Mrs. Porrance began again with, "Sol Rogers," that young worthy sprang away and out of the front door, to where the real "game" of the day had been deposited.

In a moment more a sort of angry whoop came ringing through the windows, and Sol rushed back, exclaiming:

"They're gone! Boys, they're gone! Somebody's stolen 'em. What'll we do?"

"Gone? What are gone?" calmly responded Van Rivington.

"What are gone? Why, all our pigeons and all the rest of our squirrels."

"Pigeons? What do you mean? And what squirrels are you speaking of?"

"Why, all we brought home. All we left out there under the window."

"Nonsense," said Pat Nolan. "I'll be after bringin' in a load of wood. Will supper be ready thin? It's hungry I am."

"Sol Rogers," almost angrily exclaimed Mrs. Porrance, "do you think you can deceive me?"

"Van," shouted Sol, "what have you done with them?"

"On my word and honor I've not been out of the house since I came in. I can't imagine what you're up to."

"Sol can't tell the truth if he tries," remarked Miss Almira. "He can eat his woodchuck and his crows, for all of me."

"Sol," said Van, "this beats the spotted fox. Why can't you come right out with it and tell Mrs. Porrance just what luck we had?"

But Sol Rogers was not an easy bird to catch, and the allusion to the spotted fox gave him hint enough.

"Then I will," he said, with surprising coolness. "I've had a grand, good time, Mrs. Porrance. We shot some pigeons, too, and we ate them for dinner. Cooked them ourselves."

Even Mrs. Porrance saw there was something going on among them, but just then Pat came in again, pretty heavily laden, and not with wood.

"Mrs. Porrance," he said, excitedly, "and where did you get all these? Oh, but ain't they fine ones! What would you give for the like o' them, Sol?"

"Those?" gravely remarked Mrs. Porrance. "Some fellows from the mountains brought them in. Fellows that know how to shoot."

"No crows there," said Van.

"Nor woodchucks," said Pat.

"Mrs. Porrance," gasped Sol, "I give in. I only hope those fellows from the mountains told you the truth, as I always do. If you won't say anything more about it I'll eat the woodchuck, if Miss Almira'll cook him. Van can have the crows and Pat the woodpecker. Is supper ready?"

It was, and while they were eating it the story of their day's adventures came rapidly out, all except the secret of the log-house on the hillside.

"You must have eaten a good many pigeons for your dinner, from your own account," said

Mrs. Porrance, at last. "You'd better have brought some home with you."

"How could we?" asked Sol. "It's a terrible long walk. All these crows to carry, too."

"Indeed," exclaimed Almira, "I don't see how they did it."

"You'll have to ask Van. He did it with his little hatchet. He and George Washington and I always tell the truth. That is, about pigeons."

"Van, Mr. Rivington," said Almira, "how did you do it?"

"Horseback to the town line. Boyback to the front gate."

"But how did they get into the house?"

"One boy at the window with a fish line. Another boy down there to hitch 'em on. Another boy in the house telling yarns. Sol's a very good little fellow."

"So I am," said Sol. "Mrs. Porrance thinks a great deal of me."

"Anyhow," remarked that lady, "I'm glad of something besides crows and woodpeckers."

It was after supper that Sol said to Van:

"When do you mean to see Dr. Betts about your discovery?"

"No hurry. It's a secret we can keep for a while. Seems to me I can go to bed as well as anything else I know how to do, these days."

And that very night, while they were sleeping, a couple of roughly-dressed men, in a one-horse wagon, drove watchfully along the road toward the Gap and turned into the woods by the path the boys had come out of.

The next day the old log-house was occupied, and after that it soon became known in the village that "the charcoal-burners had come back to try it on again."

And there was more than one man who said to his neighbor :

"I don't see how on earth they manage to make charcoal-burning and pigeon-trapping pay. But, then, that's their lookout, not mine."

It was the noblest kind of a pigeon pie the boys had for their Sunday dinner, and they had an abundance of corn-bread with it.

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE WITH THE HINCKLEY CROWD

THERE is every likelihood that Mrs. Porrance gave a certain part of her "game" away to somebody, for it never made its appearance on the dinner-table, and even Sol Rogers gave up inquiring about it before the week was over.

One thing was always there and at every meal, in some form or other, and it seemed to the boys as if each succeeding day brought with it less and less of other varieties of food.

Not but what there was a variety.

Mrs. Porrance beat any living cook-book in the number of styles she had for doing up corn-meal.

It was all in vain that her boarders systematically cleaned the table of all things excepting corn, for to that they were compelled to come, and she was sure to tell them how nice it was, in a tone and manner which did not admit of dispute.

"We've done our best, boys," said Van, as they were gathered in his and Sol's room one evening, toward the end of the week. "We've eaten all we could, but the meal-bag beats us."

"I told you how it would be," said Sol, "and this is only a beginning. She doesn't kill her pigs till November, and it's scarcely the middle of October now."

"What of that?" asked Pat.

"No fresh meat of any consequence till then."

"No pies or anything?"

"Apple pies, perhaps. But apples didn't do very well this year, and if the price is up there won't be many apples for us."

"You ought to take a look at the hen-coop. The chickens are fine."

"That's what we'll do, then," quietly remarked Sol. "We'll look at 'em."

"That won't hurt 'em," said Van. "I like to look at chickens, even if I can't eat 'em."

"Then, when you've done that," exclaimed Pat, "come around to the barn and look at the corn-bin. I'm in for some more shelling."

"We're only getting skim milk with it now," added Sol.

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"That's because the cows are falling off a little and butter is up."

"That's it, is it? Well, we must think a good deal about it. But there's one thing more to think of."

"What's that, Sol?" asked Van.

"The boys are getting down on us."

"How's that?"

"Oh, we've boxed and fenced and read mornings and evenings; we've hunted and fished Saturdays; we've scarcely shown ourselves on the green. Bob and Joe Hinckley have put 'em up to it, and they call us codfish, say we don't want to mix with the rest, and all that sort of thing."

"Then we must go in," said Van. "We'll show 'em."

"There'll be some kind of music if we do, then."

"All right. Pat, do you feel much like a codfish?"

"'Deed and I do, then. Saltish, kind. Not fit to be eaten. I'm in if there's fun a-coming."

Sol's keen eyes and ears had not been mistaken in the signs of unpopularity that were beginning to show themselves.

Bob and Joe were doing their best, and waiting a good chance to get even, as they called it, but they had not said anything to other people about the yellow-jacket business. That is, except to insinuate that somehow or other Sol Rogers and his friends were at the bottom of it.

That was the reason that, for two successive evenings, after school hours, Sol and Van lingered on the green all in vain. There seemed no chance for them to get in with the rest.

Nobody chose them on either side at baseball or football, more than if they had been a pair of strangers.

"To-morrow morning we'll try 'em again," said Van, and at supper-time, when Mrs. Porrance said something about their next day's sport, and asked them if they meant to fish or to hunt, Sol replied :

"No, Mrs. Porrance ; we've some important business to-morrow. The morals of Bunkerville require our attention."

"The morals of Bunkerville !" exclaimed Almira. "What do you mean ?"

"Too many heathens. Reading the *Clarion*

doesn't seem to do 'em any good. We must try our hands at it, Miss Almira."

Little more was to be gotten out of him, but even Pat Nolan managed to be among the gathering crowd of village boys and students on the green, after next morning's breakfast. Bob and Joe were there, of course, and everybody knew there was to be a grand game of baseball between the academy and the "village."

"Sure we'll not be counted in on that same," said Pat to Van, a little too loudly.

"Counted in!" exclaimed a sneering voice near him. "What do you know about ball?"

"Never mind him, Pat," said Van. "That's only Bob Hinckley, the hornet-hunter."

"Did you say anything about hornets? How are you off for codfish? I say, Joe, here's the three young aristocrats from the city. Call the boys."

"Van," remarked Sol, "they're a-coming. We're in for it."

"You mean they are."

"Look at 'em," said Pat, in a sorrowful voice. "The poor young cratures."

"Do you mean me?" roared Bob.

"That's one of 'em, Van," said Pat.

"One of who, you Paddy? Take that for your sass!"

Pat dodged the core of Bob's apple that buzzed by his head, but it struck another fellow squarely in the mouth, and that other fellow was one of Bob's crowd.

"It was Paddy's fault. Hit him."

"Did you throw that at me?"

"'Deed and I didn't," said Pat, with a grin, "but I never saw an apple core knew better where to go. Did it do yez any good?"

Things were beginning to wear a troublesome aspect, but the plucky bearing of the three friends was a good deal of a puzzle to their would-be tormentors. The crowd gathered fast, however, as crowds will, especially crowds of boys, and when Bob Hinckley suddenly exclaimed, "Now, boys, hustle 'em," there was but scanty room to hustle in.

Perhaps that was the reason the crisis came so soon.

Joe Hinckley made a sort of a charging shove at Van Rivington, and somehow never touched him.

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His push carried him by, however, and he scarcely knew what it was that tangled his feet as he went.

Anyhow, down he came, and by the time he was coming up again, flushed and angry, there was a hurly-burly all around him.

"Back to back!" shouted Van.

There had never before been anything like discipline or army tactics shown in any skirmish on the Bunkerville green, but the value of such things came out in a twinkling.

Three strong, active boys, fresh from daily practice with their boxing-gloves, fronting every way and hitting out remorselessly at every corner, made a pretty tough knot to break.

It seemed as if any assailant who rushed or struck at one of those three was dead sure to be "plumped" by another of them, while the man he was after stood on his guard.

If the Hinckley crowd had also been trained and well ordered, so as to have gone in all at once, the result might have been different, for there were nearly a dozen of them, besides the miscellaneous mass who preferred to look on.

"I'll separate 'em," shouted a big, hulking fel-

low, nearly six feet high, as he pushed to the front. "I'll teach 'em what's what!"

"It's the deacon's son," said Sol, "and his name it is Smith, and his father he is a miller."

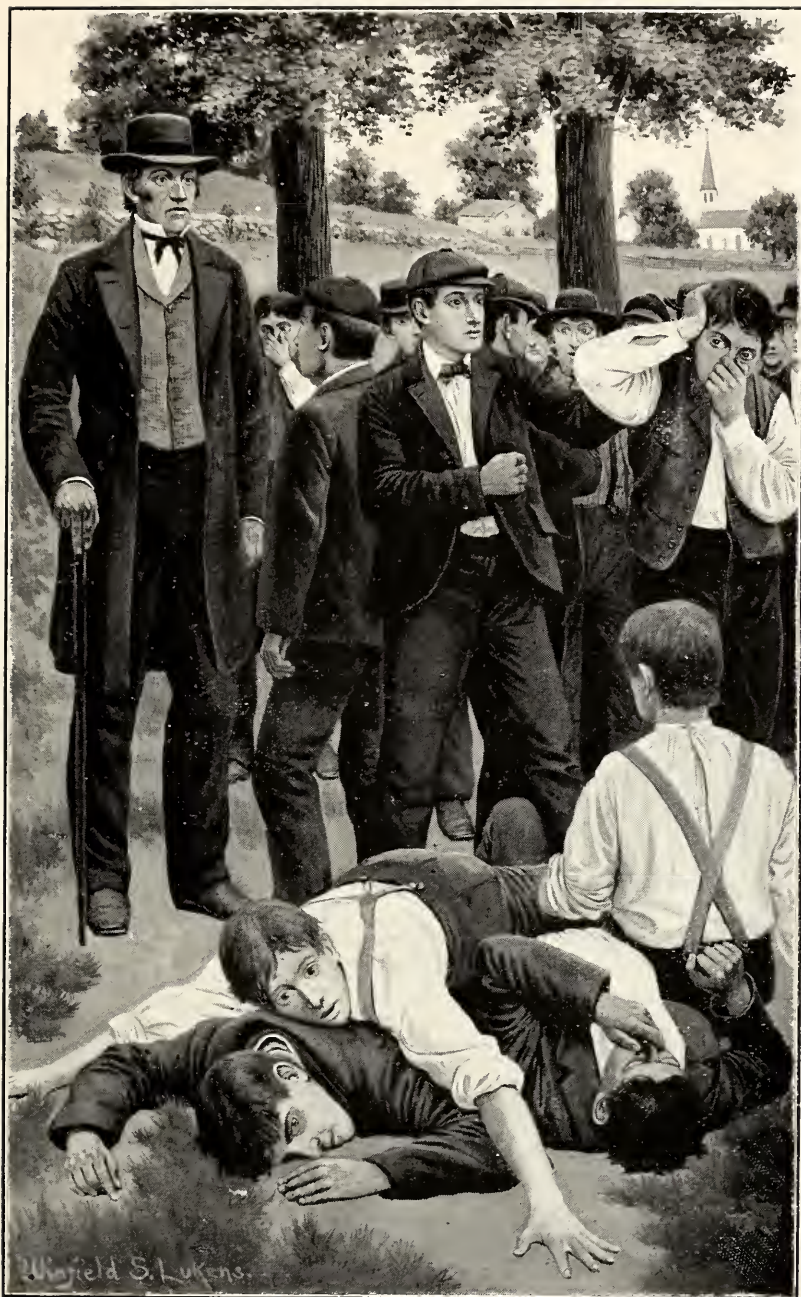
"Now, boys!" shouted Van, as he faced his big antagonist, squaring off and "dancing" forward.

If the miller's son got it hard from Sol's toe on one shin, Pat's was as hard to bear on the other, and Van's fist came up under his right arm, at the fleshy part, near the shoulder, with a force that felt as if the arm was coming out of the socket. The other arm followed as he made a grab at his shins.

Then there was the deep dent of a boot-heel just above his left knee.

No harm done; but a big, clumsy lubber so completely used up that it was no trick at all to trip and roll him over, upsetting Bob Hineckley and two others on top of him.

As for Joe, he had foolishly attempted to take Van in the rear, and was just then holding his nose with one hand and the side of his head with the other.



"BOYS! WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?"

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"One, two, three," sang Sol. "Van, you did that lovely."

"Boys! what does all this mean?"

"Back to back," said Van. "No dodging. It's Dr. Betts."

"What does this mean?" again asked the unexpected intruder.

"We're giving a bit of a boxing lesson, doctor," replied Sol.

"With tactics thrown in," added Van. "I'm playing Xenophon. Sol is Julius Cæsar, and Pat's Napoleon Bonaparte."

"You've certainly held your own," said the doctor, coming closer to the combatants. "The rules of the academy forbid fighting——"

"Fighting, doctor?" exclaimed Sol. "They may be fighting, but we're not. It's just healthy exercise. Not a soul of 'em has hit us once. They don't parry well, that's all. The poor fellows'll learn."

Dr. Betts kept his face straight as he could while he looked around at the noses and eyes of the boys who did not know how to parry, and at the miller's son, rubbing himself on the grass.

"I must look into this matter. You three will

come to my study at two o'clock this afternoon. Robert, Joseph, I'll see you at once. Bring your friends——"

And he named half a dozen whose appearance told tales of them on the spot. There was no such thing as getting away from it.

Then, with a tremendous frown on his face, the academy principal stalked solemnly away, muttering to himself:

"Splendid. To think of those three youngsters handling a crowd like that. Somebody must be punished for it. Most of 'em seem to have got enough as it is. I must lecture those three. I guess young Rivington was captain. Sol Rogers is bright enough, but he never could have done that."

The doctor was right about Van. He had not Sol's ready tongue, to be sure, but he was a born "captain." Scarcely was the excitement allowed to lull before he shouted:

"Hurrah, boys! Now for the game. Sol, who'll we pick for our nine?"

That would have been Bob Hinckley's business, under other circumstances, but he was just then sulking by the fence with Smith and Joe.

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Sol knew well enough the capacities of the players, and not a boy whose name he called out but was in a hurry to make one of that "nine."

The three friends had knocked their way into a sudden popularity that was almost oppressive. Indeed, their village opponents, already picked out and used to playing together, set at work in an unsteady and nervous sort of way that sent them away behind before they got well warmed up to it.

The general puzzle was :

"Sol Rogers always was a pretty good pitcher and batter, but how did those two city chaps ever learn baseball? They never have any chance for outdoor exercise."

That's a very common notion with country boys, and sometimes there is too much truth in it, but not always, by any means.

At all events, the academy won that game, with a score that set the villagers to practicing the next week for dear life.

And all through the game the crowd of spectators grew and grew, for word had gone around the village that Dr. Betts had broken up a riot

on the green, and some of the boys had been pounded half to death.

And Mrs. Porrance and Almira heard accounts of it which led them to expect a queer-looking lot of faces when their boarders came home to dinner.

There were other things besides baseball and boxing-lessons going on that Saturday forenoon.

Just about the time the boys made their appearance on the green, Deacon Smith stood in the door of his mill, saying to Dan :

“Sure that pony belonged to those two squatters?”

“Sure. They turned him loose when they left, early in the summer. Now they’ve come back, it’s no use to try and get any work out of him.”

“Then you’d best put him in the pound and I’ll send a bill for his keep and damages.”

“All right, sir. I’d best tend to it, fust thing, ’fore they hear tell of where he is. I turned him loose again in the pasture lot last night. Worked him well while I had him, though. He came up fast on good feed. There’s stuff in him.”

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And Dan swung his long legs away toward the pasture in a hurry, but when he reached it and climbed the fence he looked in vain for the pony.

“Over t’other side, I guess. Beyond the rise. Just where they’d sight him if they was passin’.”

Exactly. That was where the pony had gone. And somebody had been passing and had seen him, for by the time Dan had got to the end of the pasture over the “rise,” two rough-looking characters were putting up the bars into the road, and one of them held a halter fitted to the black head of the pony.

“Where’re ye going with that hoss?” shouted Dan, excitedly.

“Going? Why, it’s ours. How d’ you ever come to take him up? You knew who he belonged to.”

So he did. There was no such thing as denying it, and Dan came down a little with:

“Oh, it’s yeou, is it? When d’ ye git back? Goin’ inter the charcoal biz again?”

“Guess not. Loaf ’round for some pigeons and squirrels. Look for odd jobs and such till

it's time to go into the mountains for deer. Tired of town life and tramping. The pony's looking tip-top. Only a bit thin. You must have worked him pretty hard."

"Only had him up a week or so. Deacon'll let ye up on that. You kin send him a mess of pigeons some day."

"All right. Mebbe we will. Can't say."

And the two rough customers lounged away down the road, while Dan soliloquized :

"Hard ones, or I'm mistaken. We don't want their ill-will, though. There's no telling what sech as they won't do. But won't the deacon be riled? I guess so."

The deacon was "riled," indeed, but he agreed with Dan that it would scarcely pay to make any fuss about the pony or his "keep."

"Ain't a-going to burn charcoal this time?" he added. "Well, then, I reckon folks had best keep an eye on their sheep and their hen-roosts."

"I never heerd tell of their doin' anythin' out of the way," said Dan, "but I don't like the looks of 'em."

There were now two horses up at the log hut on the hillside, and to the miller's surprise, one of

them was driven down, the next Monday, after a load of "feed"—oats, bran and the like, and it was paid for, and so, he learned, had been a good lot of groceries and provisions the two squatters had bought of Calkins & Muggin.

"Reckon their money won't last long," he said to himself, "and then honest folks had better look out."

Be that as it might, things around the old log-house began to assume an almost comfortable appearance.

A very decent shelter was put up for the two ponies. Adjoining that was built a cowshed, with a queer little tenant of a cow, as if the squatters had taken a fancy to milk. Of furniture there was indeed very little. No more than could have been easily brought in the one-horse wagon, but quite enough for such rude house-keeping.

It is wonderful how very little a human being really needs, when you cut him down to it.

Of one thing the squatters had enough, and that was arms and dogs. Two double-barreled guns, two good rifles. Not repeaters, though. Besides these, a revolver hung in its belt-case

over each of the rude couches where those two men slept, and a pair of strong, half-bred deer-hounds did duty as watch-dogs at night, and in the absence of their masters by day.

What had all this to do with the three boys at Bunker Academy?

Nothing in particular, as yet.

Certainly not half so much as some things that were stirred up by their respective letters home, after that Saturday's performances on the village green.

They had been questioned pretty sharply by their landlady and her daughter when they went to dinner, and Mrs. Porrance roundly expressed her astonishment, not only at the good appearance they made, but at Sol Rogers' assertion.

"Fight? No, it was a game of ball. Van was captain of our nine, and the way we flayed the noodles wasn't slow, now, I tell you."

"But was there really no fight?" anxiously inquired Almira.

"Can't say. We're peaceable, we are. By the way, Van, didn't you see a sort of a disturbance among the boys, just before the game began?"

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"Seems to me I did. But then Dr. Betts was there, and he'll know what to do about it."

"'Dade an' he will, then," remarked Pat Nolan. "He's a fine man."

Not a black eye or a bruise to be seen among them, and yet she had been told such awful things.

It was a mystery, and Mrs. Porrance gave it up with, "I guess there's been a mistake made somewhere."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Sol. "Most likely those Hinckley boys and their crowd made it. They never did know any too much."

They never before knew quite as much as they did that day, not only from the results of this unlucky "hustle," but from the sharp lecture they got from Dr. Betts in consequence.

He had wound up with, "I scarcely need advise you to let young Rivington and his friends alone. They have taken care of that for themselves."

And he could not have said anything more galling, if he had tried his best.

After dinner was over, Sol remarked to Mrs. Porrance :

"Little Dr. Betts has invited all three of us to call on him, and we've no time to lose. Two o'clock was his hour."

"So, then, there was something!"

"Of course, Mrs. Porrance. He would not trouble us to call if he did not need our advice. Pat can tell him how to shell corn."

Off they went and there was almost an expression of pride in Mrs. Porrance's face as she looked out of the window after them.

"They'll do," she said. "I believe there was a fight, and I'm bound to find out all about it."

The remarkable three, however, were less interested in their landlady's opinion of them than they were in the momentous interview before them.

The home of Dr. Betts was a very pretty sort of a place, and a whole wing of it was given up to the comfortable "library," in which he received his visitors. The average "boy," or other student of the academy, was supposed to have the same sort of feeling for that room and its varied contents that a man of the old time might have had for the laboratory of an out-and-out magician.

He must have been a brave sort of chap who could have mustered cheek enough to tell the doctor a lie with the backs of all those tremendous books looking down from their shelves and watching him all the time.

Sol and his friends had no lies to tell for themselves about anything, and their very straightforward answers, not to mention some peculiarly quaint remarks dropped by Sol Rogers himself, seemed, on the whole, to be satisfactory to the academy principal.

He told them as much, but with a severity of countenance which took nothing from the force of his decision, that they must each write home a full account of the affair to their parents.

This they promised to do that very day, and they kept their words faithfully. How should they have known that a similar promise had been exacted of their several assailants?

It had been, nevertheless, and when, a few days later, the mother of Solomon Rogers met that of Robert and Joseph Hinckley at their Church Sewing-Society, there was a look of something like suppressed satisfaction on the face of the latter as she remarked:

"I suppose you've heard from Sol, Mrs. Rogers? Dreadful, is it not? But boys will be boys. I hope your son was not really much hurt."

"Hurt? No; not a scratch. And, indeed, Robert and Joseph ought not to bear any malice. They began it. It was not the fault of Sol and his friends that they had to defend themselves. Dr. Betts thinks so, too."

"Dr. Betts? Why, he told my boys to write to me and explain the matter. They were compelled to beat ——"

"Beat, indeed! You mean to get a beating. I've no doubt whatever it was a sound one. Sol says he never saw a better boxer than his roommate, young Rivington. No wonder a couple of green country boys could not face him. They ought never to have tried. He didn't get a scratch, either. Nor did the Irish boy that helped them. You should teach your sons better wisdom, as well as better manners, Mrs. Hinckley."

She said all that with such rapidity that her astonished neighbor could not get a word in edgewise, and when she had finished it, the latter,

whose flushed face and snapping eyes betrayed the depth of her interest in that little skirmish on Bunkerville green, could only gasp :

“Mrs. Rogers, I declare ! Who would have thought you would have supported your rowdy boy in such wickedness ? ”

“Wickedness ? It isn’t wicked for him to defend himself, and if your boys got a sound thrashing, I’ve no doubt they deserved it.”

“Thrashing, indeed ! Did I ever hear the like ! Why, I’ll write to Dr. Betts about it.”

“Do, then. No doubt he’ll tell you more truths than your boys have sent you. Sol never told me a lie in his life.”

Nor had he in the present case ; but he had sent his mother so graphic and withal so humorous and complete an account of the discomfiture of the Hinckley crowd as had resulted in making a lifelong enmity between the two matrons.

For all that, each mother sent to Bunkerville a well-written lecture on the evil of getting into fights with bad boys.

Bad boys like the Hinckleys were described in one letter.

Very bad boys like Sol Rogers and his friends were set forth in the other.

But what were Mr. and Mrs. Rivington to do with the very frank and manly statement sent them by their own son—the captain and the victor of the whole business?

“Husband,” said Van’s mother, “I’ve no doubt it was just as he describes it.”

“Exactly. He’s no coward. He isn’t one bit afraid of you or me. He wouldn’t vary a hair from the truth.”

“No, he never did.”

“What shall you write him, then?”

“Tell him to give Dr. Betts my compliments, and thank him for the kind interest he has taken,” said her husband.

“But about the fight?”

“Advise him to keep clean out of just as many as he can. Boys like him don’t fight if they can help it, anyhow.”

“I hope those other boys will let him alone.”

“Well, from what he says about it, I’m half inclined to think they will. I’m glad he’s so good a boxer.”

Good Mrs. Rivington had, as all good women

have, a horror of fights and all brutality. She would have been glad to have all the world at peace.

And yet in her heart of hearts she was ready to join her husband just then in his pleasure over Van's skill.

That very day, however, just after the postman made his call, Mr. Maguire came up-stairs from the grocery to find Pat Nolan's mother in a high state of excitement.

"Did yez get a letther from Pat the day?" he asked.

"A letther, is it, indade? Misther Maguire, the boy's been fightin'."

"Fightin', is it? The young spalpane! Fightin' and disgracin' his family and friends. Was he much beaten, Mrs. Maguire?"

"Beaten? Ye ould noodle! Is it me own b'y ye're miscallin' with yer talk of disgr-r-race? Sure and he and the other two that was with him—good luck to thim two b'ys—they bate the crowd that was four to wan against thim. Oh, but it's a grand letther! Ave that Dutch doctor ownly knowed how Pat was coming to the fore, wudn't he be a proud man?"

The grocer tried hard to look the "heavy father" for the occasion, but he was beginning to feel more than a little pride in his stepson "bein' eddecated at boordin'-school up in New England," and his Irish blood positively forbade any wrath against the victors in a "shindy."

So Pat Nolan received the least reproof of all three of them when the answer came to that letter of his.

CHAPTER IX

FORAGING

MRS. PORRANCE may have been a bit proud of her boarders in her own way, but that had nothing whatever to do with her notions of the diet that was good for them.

It was toward the middle of the next week, at breakfast, that Van Rivington asked Sol Rogers :

“What on earth’s the matter with your head—lost your comb?”

“No, not that. I’ve been planting too much corn, that’s all. I’m beginning to tassel out. Don’t you see, all my hair’s turning to corn-silk.”

Miss Almira looked daggers, but her mother never changed a muscle.

She would have scorned to notice a mere saucy remark from a boy like Sol Rogers. She had had too many of them under her roof, year after year, for that.

No change was made in the table supplies, therefore, for another week, except that the boys brought home a grand mess of fish and half a dozen squirrels on the Saturday.

And what made the whole thing more aggravating was the steady account Pat Nolan gave in of the quantities of butter, eggs, poultry and other good things, from the house and the farm, which he was compelled, from time to time, to deliver for Mrs. Porrance to various purchasers.

She was a woman who dealt for cash, both in buying and selling, and not even Calkins & Muggin could have beaten her much on a bargain.

Things were going on smoothly enough at the academy, and Pat Nolan had already won his promotion to a higher grade in his Greek and Latin, while he kept a good deal more than up to the mark in his other branches.

Again and again Dr. Betts felt called upon to wonder —

“How that boy could ever have managed to pick up so much in a mere public school!”

But Sol Rogers was growing thoughtful, so to speak, with every day that passed, and one evening he surprised his friends by shutting a volume

of novels with a great bang, as he burst forth into:

“Boys, what’s stealing?”

“Takin’ what don’t belong to ye. Unless it’s a pony, and ye find him by the side of the road with no halter.”

“Hush, Pat. What do you know about stealing? Van, you’re going to be a lawyer, if ever you know enough. What’s stealing?”

“Helping yourself without asking leave, and then not paying for it.”

“Then isn’t Mrs. Porrance stealing from us fellows?”

“What has she stolen?” asked Van.

“Everything but our corn. It almost stops my growth to think of it. All our mince and pumpkin pies, all our chickens and things. Just groan over it, boys.”

“I don’t know ——” began Van.

“I don’t, either. She can keep all she’s got, but I’m dreaming of reform.”

“What sort of a reform?”

“Oh, we can settle that as soon as we arrange about the honesty.”

“Honesty of what?” said Pat.

"Of helping ourselves to our own. To the kind of things we pay for, and that Pat Nolan works for. Why, his very voice is getting husky, and I've corns coming on my toes."

"It's a fact," said Van. "We never made any bargain for so much corn."

"'Dade an' we didn't," said Pat.

And whether or not this reasoning was morally sound, that council of boys broke up that night with a very positive decision, variously expressed, that the time for some sort of action had nearly arrived.

The first practical suggestion in the way of what Sol Rogers called "foraging for supplies" came from Pat Nolan, whose "sleeping-coop," again to quote from Sol, was just over the milk-room.

"I've found a knot in the floor," he said, "that comes out aisy and it fits in again like a cork into a bottle."

"Pat, my boy, you're a jewel. I'll rig a pump. It's not the skim milk pans we'll go for."

Nor was it. A little tin pump was easily procured at the tinsmith's, and a length of common gas-pipe rigged to it. When it was completed it

could easily be taken in pieces and hidden away, but, as Pat remarked, "It was a powerful dangerous thing for milk."

"Pat," said Sol, "it's not the pump that's dangerous. It's the knot-hole."

"No," remarked Van, "it's not the knot-hole or the pump. It's the corn."

That was very well for a beginning, but the next bit of furniture was a little bit of a "kerosene stove," and that was accompanied by quite an array of cooking and eating utensils, of small size and cheap material. The whole outfit could be stowed away in Sol's trunk when not in use.

"Now," said Van, "for a rope-ladder. We can't be dependent on the front door."

"That's easy enough," said Sol. "And it won't be the first time there's been one put out of that window. You just hook the upper end to the window-sill, and the first boy that goes down fastens the lower end to the foot of the lilac-bush. Then it's easy traveling."

"We won't begin our housekeeping till we're good and ready," said Van. "Sol, you must cultivate a contented countenance nowadays."

"What, play the hypocrite over all that corn?"

"Conceal your feelings, that's all. Be convinced that corn is good for you."

"It's a fine fruit," said Pat.

"I'll try. But it's my tongue I'm more afraid of than any other part of my face."

"True for you," said Pat. "Your wake spot's in your tongue."

Sol promised faithfully, and he succeeded a good deal better than might have been expected. Mrs. Porrance could not remember, in any previous year, having been blessed with so well-behaved and contented a lot of boarders.

So very fond of corn!

The milk-room, however, was Miss Almira's peculiar province, and a very neat place it was. Except in very cold weather, that poetical young lady rather liked the idea of being a "milkmaid." They are such a rosy kind of being, as everybody knows, and then Almira was by no means a lazy sort of person.

In fact, that milk-room was a kind of show affair, bright with shining tin and almost painfully clean.

Great, therefore, was the chagrin and annoyance of the milkmaid, morning after morning,

when she unlocked the door and went in, to find great blotches and spatters of milk on the floor. Once, indeed, she found one of her pans of "last night's milk" half empty, although she could not see that the cream on the surface had been disturbed.

That was before Van decided to divide his pumping so as not to drain too much from any one pan.

"Mother," said Almira, after Mrs. Porrance had made a careful survey, "can it be rats?"

"None in the house. The window's fastened, too, and the lock's a good one. You must be careless."

"I, mother? Well, I'll just wipe the floor clean to-night, and we'll see. I'm never careless. The pans were full and I did not spill a drop."

"Who did, then? You couldn't have drank up all that milk yourself. No, you don't hold enough!"

So far as that went, Mrs. Porrance could have beaten her daughter by at least a quart, but the next morning made a greater mystery of the matter than ever.

Pat had been running the pump and he forgot

to let it drain back into the pan, all that was in the pipe, when he was done pumping.

"You've done it," Sol had said to him. "There's a good pint of it on the floor this time. It's an awful waste of good milk."

So it was, and their landlady and her daughter thought so when they came to see it.

"It can't be rats, mother. It's those awful boys."

"Boys, indeed! How'd they get in, I'd like to know?"

"They may have a key that fits that lock."

"I'll fix that. I'll put on a Dutch padlock. They won't pick that in a hurry. But then they haven't troubled the eggs. There's the basket. Count 'em."

A careful count showed that the eggs were all there; but the new padlock was brought out and put on that very day.

Those eggs! How they had weighed on the mind of Sol Rogers!

In fact, they had so stimulated his ingenuity that, that very evening, he astonished Pat and Van by producing a bit of a bag net that fastened on the end of the pump-tube.

"Now we've got 'em. See that?"

"They'll drop out," said Pat.

"No; the mouth of it pulls up like the mouth of a purse when you pull the string."

"It'll only hold one at a time."

"That's all you can pull through the knot-hole. Two would stick us. It'll be better fun than fishing."

So it proved to be, and a round dozen were angled for and lifted that very evening. What was more, they were nicely boiled and eaten, to the last egg, with plenty of new milk to keep them company.

If late suppers are ever good for boys, or anybody, those three were in a fine way to become fat.

That next morning, however, happened to be a Saturday, and the boys were counting on a grand day's fishing.

They meant to take their guns along; they hoped for Pat Nolan's company, and they anticipated a fine time generally.

They were up early, therefore, quite as much before their usual hour as were the ladies of the household.

Pat was already down and out, attending to the wood-pile, the henhouse, and all that, when Sol and Van heard Mrs. Porrance and her daughter open the door of the milk-room.

"We'll see now," said the former, in a strong, determined tone of voice.

"That lock hasn't been disturbed, for I kept the key myself."

"Whist, Van," exclaimed Sol. "Put down your gun. Fun's coming."

"Milk on the floor again, Almira, as sure as you live!"

"Mother! Those eggs! I'll count 'em right away."

She did, and came near turning pale as she announced the result.

"A dozen gone? Did you say there was a dozen gone?"

"Yes, mother, a dozen. And the milk, too. Mother, do you believe in ghosts?"

"Ghosts, and eggs and milk! Figs, Almira! I'm ashamed of you. There's something wrong about the window. Guess I can fix that. Only I don't see why they didn't take all the basket-

ful. If I'd crawled through a window after eggs I'd never stop at a dozen."

"You don't mean to say you'd steal?"

"Almira, don't be a fool. Let's see about the window. I declare, I'll nail it down. That is, at the bottom. We can let in air at the top. Get me some nails and the hammer."

Sensible woman, not a doubt of it; and she made that milk-room as tight as a drum before she left it.

But the knot was all the while fitting tightly in its place overhead, and she never dreamed of three boys like her boarders creeping in through a knot-hole. She knew very well that they could not do anything of the kind. She could not have done it herself.

The breakfast-table was a trifle glum that morning, however, and Mrs. Porrance seemed, to Sol's perceptions, to cast a jealous eye on the jug of maple syrup and the way he poured its contents over the "flannel" pancakes.

"Splendid syrup," he said. "Pat, you must knock over something handsome to-day."

"Pat is not going with you this time. We want him at home."

It was hard on Pat, for he had toiled early and late that week, and had earned, as he always did, a good deal more than "half his board."

More than the whole of it, in any kind of money; but there was no appeal from that unjust decision.

That was a sad morning for Pat Nolan. Not only was he to miss his expected sport, but even before breakfast was over he heard the busy saw of Black Sam at work on a fresh load of wood, which had come in from the farm a day or so before.

"You're in for it," said Sol, as he stood with him a few minutes later and looked at Sam.

"Sure and she's gettin' back the worth of thim eggs."

"She is, that. But then cold weather's coming. She means we shan't freeze. We'll be having fires in our rooms inside of three weeks."

"Does ye reckon on de burnin' ob dese yere sticks?" inquired Sam, with a broad grin, as he stopped the motion of his saw. "'Cause if ye does, ye's gettin' fooled, dat's all."

"How's that?" said Sol.

"Dis yer load is a cuttin' up for Mrs. Porrance's minister."

"Oh," said Pat, "that's all right. I don't care. So she means to give it away, does she?"

"Not much gib, I reckon. It jest counts in on de 'scription to his salary. Wood's jest as good as money, and she charges de price, you bet she does."

"Can't help that, no how," said Pat. "So he gets it. I'll have to split it."

"Pat," exclaimed Sol, "we'll have to make some kind of reckoning for this Saturday's work. It'll all come right, my boy. She's no business to crowd that on you."

"I can't afford to make a fuss."

"No, but you can afford to go in with us. We'll help you collect it, and we won't take all our change in eggs and milk."

He and Van were shortly on their way into the hills, catching rides, as usual, to save walking, and planning all sorts of things on their way.

"Van," said Sol, when at last they struck into the woods, on their way to the little lake they

had selected for their fishing, "I wonder if it's a good place? We never were here before."

"You know as much as I do. I hope we'll have good luck to-day."

"For Mrs. Porrance's sake?"

"Not exactly. We'll talk about that. Let's keep an eye out—— Hullo! Hist! Look there!"

And he sank on the ground as he did so, followed by Sol in utter silence, while their fishing-rods were dropped and their guns thrust forward.

"Sol, they say it's not the correct thing to shoot partridges sitting."

"No more it is, but we haven't any dog. They'll rise when we give 'em the first barrel, and we can let 'em have the second on the wing. That's all the sportsmen we can afford to be with such a covey as that in less than ten rods of us. Ready?"

"All ready! One, two—fire!"

The birds, fat and fine, and a large covey had been clustered closely on the slope of a little knoll, and there was just enough of distance for the shot to spread well.

The second barrels, too, followed the first be-

fore the poor fair things could fairly take wing.

It was "pot-hunting" of the worst kind, and older sportsmen would have been a little ashamed of it, but it did bring down the game, for the boys picked up no less than seven victims on the spot, and two more that were wounded only flew a short distance before they also tumbled over.

"Did you ever hear of anything like that before, Van?"

"Never did, Sol. It's just a sort of bird-butchery. But they're fat ones, and no mistake."

"We needn't do any more shooting. Let's go in on our fish."

"The squirrels are out now. We may get a shot or two while we're just sitting around by the lake."

They were almost safe to count on that, only as Sol said :

"One of their squirrels was a rabbit, and another was a wood-duck."

"No pigeons this time," remarked Van. "We must try the Gap again some day."

"No fishing there. But how they are biting this morning!"

So they were, and when the two friends set out for home they were almost ready to quarrel with the luck that gave them so much to carry.

It would have been a good deal worse but for the permission they got from a farmer to "Pile thar plunder on top of the wood" he was taking in, with a great lazy yoke of oxen to draw.

"You'll be late home to-night," said Sol.

"No, I won't. My old woman's in the ville. We're goin' to stay over Sunday and go back to-morrow night arter meetin'. Them's a splendid lot of birds. Lemme look at yer guns. So'thin' new, I reckon."

It was slow trudging after those oxen, but the edge of the town was reached at last, and there the two sportsmen halted for a council.

"Van," said Sol, "it would do little Dr. Betts a world of good to eat some of those partridges."

"There's more'n we want."

"One a piece for us to be cooked by our own fireside. The rest for our little friend. They might make him grow."

"I'm agreed; only I hope he'll stay where he is. He's big enough. But what about the fish?"

"We must take home all we need for breakfast, but I don't care to pile up Mrs. Porrance's dinner-table. She can do that herself," said Sol.

"It'll be corn, then."

"Let it. We'll have partridges in our room."

"But what'll we do with the rest?"

"Van, my boy, she's making Pat split wood for Sligo, her minister ——"

"So you said."

"And Sam says it's charged to him on his subscription ——"

"You said that, too, and it seems mean, but it's a way they have up here."

"Keep still, Van. He's a nice kind of chap, and he's got six young ones, and they don't look as if they had corn enough, let alone fish. Let's carry him a string and call it our subscription."

"Tip-top. The youngsters 'll go for 'em. I say, Sol, four birds 'll be enough for Dr. Betts. Let's put in two on Sligo. One for him and one for his wife."

"I like that. Maybe he'll give us a better sermon to-morrow."

"One with birds in it?"

"Yes, or say fish."

"Now, then, Sol, let's get around to Dr. Betts's by the back street. Sligo's on the way home. Don't want anybody to know what we've been up to."

"Dr. Betts 'll know."

"No, he won't. We won't give our names. We'll just say they're from two of his nicest little boys."

"Van, you're a boy after my own heart. So is Betts. Come on."

They attracted but little attention on the almost deserted back street at that time of day, for the sun was not yet down and people were at their work. A few minutes more and they were standing on the broad front stoop of the doctor's residence, waiting for the door to open.

"You do the talking, Sol," said Van.

"I will, my boy ——"

Just then the door swung wide.

"Good-evening, young gentlemen. Will you walk in?"

"No, thank you, doctor. We've been fishing, and we've caught some partridges. I mean we've been shooting, and we've hooked some birds. I say, Van, you tell it."

The smile on the face of the academy principal was good-nature itself, as Van handed him two brace of the plump, well-feathered game, with the straightforward remark :

“These are for you, doctor, with our compliments.”

“Can you spare them?”

“Abundantly. Look at what a pile we left on the grass by the gate.”

“I think I will,” said he, as he strode forward. “You must be good marksmen. Good fishermen, too. I thank you heartily, my young friends. I’m fond of game, but I have little time for shooting nowadays. Don’t let your sports interfere with your studies, that’s all.”

“We will not, indeed,” said Van, and Sol exclaimed, enthusiastically :

“Interfere, doctor? What wouldn’t I give for a double-barreled breech-loading invention for learning Greek!”

But Dr. Betts only picked up his partridges and marched into the house, a good deal like a man who was trying not to laugh.

“We’ve captured him entirely,” said Sol. “Now for Parson Sligo.”

The door of the modest little white parsonage was half-hidden by a vine-covered trellis, and that seemed to serve as a kind of frame for the meek, sweet-faced little lady who made her appearance in it, in response to the bell-pull.

“Good-evening, Mrs. Sligo,” said Van. “We’ve come to pay our subscription.”

“Your subscription?”

“Yes, ma’am. We subscribe two partridges and a string of fish. Sorry we can’t make it larger.”

There was a frank and merry humor in Van’s face and voice as he held out his subscription, and the minister’s little wife laughed cheerily enough as she thanked him. Her husband’s salary was apt to be paid in curious coin, but it did not always come in so pleasant a shape as that.

Two wee bits of Sligos that were tugging at her gown seemed scarcely to know which to make the biggest eyes at—the birds, the fish, or the two polite and smiling boys.

These latter, however, were anxious to get away, now their errand was accomplished, and Sol remarked, as they shut the gate behind them :

“Van, how splendidly lighter our load is! I feel relieved.”

“So do I. But I doubt if Mrs. Porrance would like it as well.”

“I hope not. We won’t tell her; not now, at least. But I do hope she’ll find out, somehow.”

“She will; don’t you be afraid.”

Mrs. Porrance was just the sort of woman to find out anything, but she knew nothing at all of the three partridges her boarders left in the shrubbery when they came in with the rest of their cargo.

“A wood-duck. They’re wretched little things. Two squirrels. There’s not much of them. One rabbit, and not a big one, by any means. That’s a slim account of a day’s shooting. We’ll not cook any of ’em for supper. The fish. Well, they’ll do better. More’n we’ll need for breakfast, but there won’t be enough left for dinner.”

“Oh, we’ll have the game for dinner.”

“No, I guess we’ll keep that till Monday or Tuesday. I’ll look out that it don’t spoil. We’ll divide the fish. We’ll keep enough for breakfast. That’ll be plenty” (for she was separating them

into two piles as she spoke). "Patrick, you know where the minister lives?"

"To be sure, ma'am."

"Then take those fish there as quick as you can, with my compliments, and come right back."

There was a trace of a cloud on Van Rivington's face, although he said nothing, but Sol Rogers slipped out with Pat as far as the front door.

"Sure you know the place, Pat? Rev. Mr. Belden's; brick house; left-hand side; two blocks above the green. Hurry back; we've lots to tell you."

"Sure," said Pat to himself, as he trudged along, "av it hadn't been for Sol Rogers I'd have carried the fish to the wrong house."

So he would, indeed, and now he delivered them "with Mrs. Porrance's compliments," and hurried back.

"Did they say anything?" asked his landlady.

"Not a word, ma'am. I gave me errand and the fish to a girl at the door, and didn't stay a minute."

"You've been remarkably spry about it, that's

a fact. Now we'll have supper. You must be hungry."

So they were, indeed, but they did not eat enough to bust them, for Sol had put them in mind of "eggs and things," and they waited.

The first thing he said to Van, after they got to their room, was :

"Van, my boy, don't look glum. Our revenge is begun. Those fish went to the one woman Mrs. Porrance hates most."

"Who is that ?"

"Mrs. Belden. She's the wife of the minister of the other church, you know."

It is quite likely Mrs. Porrance would not have passed the remainder of that evening so placidly if she had known just where those fish had gone, or just how badly puzzled was tall, thin, black-eyed Mrs. Belden.

That latter lady positively declared to her husband :

"There's a trap in it, somewhere. You may depend upon it, Widow Porrance is a most designing woman."

"Can't help that," replied he ; "they're capital

fish. Look at that pickerel, and that bass, and those perch."

"Plenty for a small family like ours. But how'd she get 'em? Never bought 'em, you may depend on that."

"Bought 'em? Of course not. Her boarders caught 'em. I've heard of those boys. Great fishermen, and all that."

"Then she didn't rob herself. You may depend on that. What amazes me is that she sent 'em to us and not to Mr. Sligo."

"Anyhow, my dear, you must send her a polite note of thanks. If not to-night, in the morning."

"Before meeting?"

"Well, after. Or, seeing it's Sunday, you might leave it till Monday."

It was just as well, if Mrs. Porrance's Sunday was not to be spoiled for her.

Perhaps it would have been just as badly spoiled if she had known what was going on upstairs in her own house. The boys went out after tea, and were gone a good while. Long enough to cut across the garden and the field beyond it, back of the house, to the margin of the

bit of a river that supplied the ponds. They only remained there long enough, however, to pluck and clean three partridges. That was not a long while, either.

On their return they carried nothing through the front door. Almira let them in, and she could have sworn they came in just as usual, with nothing in their hands.

Pat, of course, went around to the wood-shed for an armful of wood for the kitchen, and that was all he brought in. He could stop on the way, though, as easily as not, under Sol's window, and hitch three nicely cleaned birds to a string Van Rivington let down from above for that purpose.

Oh, yes, Pat Nolan knew quite enough for that, and he did it, and there was nothing wrong in it, either.

When his chores were done, too, Mrs. Porrance was not the woman to keep him from joining his friends.

On the whole, she was pretty well satisfied with the way in which things seemed to be going—fish, game, boarders and all. That is, all things outside of the milk-room, but there was a

mystery which was troubling her soul within her.

“It’s the window. No doubt of it, Almira; only I don’t see how they got in, and then got out and fastened it so carefully behind ’em. It’s nailed now, anyway, and we’ll see if we’re to be robbed of our eggs and milk. If we are, I’ll have Pat Nolan watch for ’em with his gun.”

“Oh, mother!”

“I will, then; it’s burglary.”

“It’s dreadful, mother, but so is a gun. And Pat! If any one’s to watch, it ought to be Mr. Rivington.”

“He’s a good shot, I do believe,” calmly responded the stern widow.

The milk-room supplied a plentiful subject for talk down-stairs, but the boys were almost too busy for overmuch conversation.

“We’ve only room for one bird to-night,” said Sol. “We’ll broil that, and we’ll have some coffee, and some toast, and some boiled eggs. I don’t mind frying one or two. These, Van, are from the barn, not the basket. Patrick brought them in.”

“Breach of trust, Pat,” said Van.

"Not any," said Pat. "It's not Mrs. Porrance's hens laid those eggs at all. They're not hers."

"How's that, Patrick?"

"Why, if the neighbors' hens find the barn-door open and walk in, and if then the door shuts itself behind 'em so they lay eggs before they get out, and if they get used to that same, it's only chargin' 'em rent I am when I take care of the eggs for 'em."

It was a little mixed, Pat's argument on the egg question, but it was plain that he was dealing fairly with Mrs. Porrance.

"As for the hens," said Pat, "not a one of 'em asked me what I would do with the eggs."

At all events, they were fresh and good, and no cook in America could have added much to the flavor of that half-way "stolen meal," as the boys cooked it for themselves.

Little right had any one to complain of what they were doing with their own game and their own coffee, and so forth, but, even as they ate, they discussed plans for the future which promised worse, if not more dangerous, remedies for

what Sol described as "Mrs. Porrance's corn-famine."

They talked and they talked, and their conversation drifted into pies.

"There's plenty a-comin'," said Pat. "She bought all sorts of spices and things to-day, and the butcher is to bring her the pie-meat on Monday. Sure and she's going to make a pile of 'em."

"Mince pies!" exclaimed Sol. "That's her stronghold, Van. Now, that's a good piece of news."

"May be it is and may be it isn't," remarked Pat.

"How could it help it?"

"How? Well, I'll tell ye. The pies are for the big donation that's coming in a week or so, may be two, I can't say, at Mr. Sligo's. It's a way they have up here. Some other woman stands the meat, and Mrs. Porrance does the rest, and the baking. Then the crowd that furnish cakes, and all that, and the pies, they invite the public and tell the minister's wife what else they'll want to eat, and then they all gather at his house and eat it up, ye know. That's

what they call a donation, and they charge it to the minister as a part of his salary. When he's poor, they only have it once a year, but if his salary's good, or he's got property of his own, so he can stand it, they go for him twice."

"Pat, my boy," said Sol, "I've been to donations all my life, and I never heard 'em so well explained before. But we must consider the subject of those pies. Mince pies 'll keep all the winter."

"Not in the wrong kind of company," said Van.

"Our company, for instance."

"Or a donation party."

"Van, I'm afraid those pies 'll be safe from the likes of us. They'll go from the oven to the big swing shelf in the cellar, and the key 'll be turned on them. Alas, for us!"

"That's a terribly creaky lock to that outside cellar door," musingly returned Van. "I've heard it opened. We must put in some oil, right away."

"Oil is good for locks. But it won't creak without a key."

"Never you mind about that, Sol. We'll not

spend this winter in Bunkerville without any mince pies."

"She'll have some made for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Oh, that's too long to wait. So is Christmas and New Year's, and next Fourth of July."

"We won't wait, Van, my boy. I've great confidence in you. Patrick, we will attend to the donation pies for you."

CHAPTER X

THE FIRST BUCK OF THE SEASON

THE next day was Sunday, and should have been a day of rest and peace to all Bunkerville.

So it was to a part, at least, of the population.

The six little Sligos, with their papa and mamma, voted those fish the best they had ever eaten, and when they all set out for church the reverend gentleman wore none the less a smiling face when he thought of those two stuffed partridges quietly doing themselves brown in the oven.

He preached an excellent sermon.

"That's the fish," said Sol to Van, in a whisper. "He hasn't got to the birds."

"He'll get to 'em. Wonder how Dr. Betts feels."

Dr. Betts, impatient man, had tried a broiled partridge for breakfast, and he told Mrs. Porrance so as they were coming out of the church, and he added :

"We mean to have the rest for dinner. You may tell your young friends I never ate finer ones, and I am greatly obliged to them. They're a pair of promising boys, madam."

"Partridges?" muttered Mrs. Porrance to herself, in astonishment, and quite loudly, as the doctor bowed and went smiling by. "What can he mean? Partridges!"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Porrance. Did they not tell you? Two such beautiful birds they left with me, and such a splendid string of fish. They brought them to the door themselves. Was it not kind? You may thank them again for me. I didn't say half enough, I'm sure."

And little Mrs. Sligo paused for breath, just as two of the deacons' wives pounced upon her to ask some questions about the meeting of the Dorcas Society that week, and Mrs. Porrance permitted herself to be swept down the aisle by the crowd and out of the church-door.

There was something in it all that she could not begin to understand; but there was worse to come, for the "other" church, nearest of three or four on the green, was just then disgorging its own congregation.

What could possess that odious, meddlesome, overbearing Mrs. Belden to come down the walk towards Pat Nolan's landlady with so serene a smile of amity?

Could it have been meant for benevolence?

Certainly not.

An effort at negotiation with an ancient enemy?

No, it was too placid for that.

"My dear Mrs. Porrance, I hope you are well to-day? So kind of you to think of us. They were very fine fish ——"

Something a good deal like a flash of lightning shot across the mind of Mrs. Porrance, and she rallied for the trial before her, like the brave old widow that she was, with three unaccountable boys on her hands.

"Oh, the fish? Do not speak of them, please. Some our boys caught. They enjoy it so. I like to be neighborly. Is Mr. Belden well?"

"Quite well, thank you. And Mr. Sligo? I do hope his congregation will keep up. Did I not hear you feared you would lose some of your best members?"

"Did you? A great mistake, then. Mr. Sligo

was never more popular. Why don't you get Mr. Belden to go a-fishing? He'd like it. Besides, that would be one way for him to imitate Peter and the rest."

"I think I will. It would suit him exactly. He's the best of men."

"No doubt. Ah, there are my boys. Good-morning, Mrs. Belden."

"Good-morning."

That was pretty good "fencing" for two elderly females of rival churches, but Mrs. Porrance got through without helping Mrs. Belden out of her puzzle.

Her own was all gone. She now knew where Pat Nolan had delivered his fish, and she began to tell him so the moment she got into the house.

"The wrong place, was it?" ruefully exclaimed Pat. "Then it was Sol's fault. I'll go for them fish this minute, and I'll have 'em back here—unless, ma'am, indeed, they may have eaten them."

He started for the door with so strong a semblance of being in earnest that Mrs. Porrance fairly shouted after him:

"Stop, Pat. Come back. Go for them? Do you s'pose I'd have them know it was a mistake? You stupid fellow!"

"That's it, ma'am."

"Never mind. I won't say any more about it. Not to you."

The others were just then coming in, and Sol Rogers was promptly "cornered" as to how he came to send Pat to the wrong place.

"Wrong, was it? Oh, no, I guess not. Sligo had enough. We thought Belden might like 'em."

"But you did not ask me?"

"Never thought of it. Neither did Van. I'm awful forgetful when I'm around giving away my fish."

"And the partridges? What did you and Van give them away for, instead of bringing them home?"

"I don't know. Was there any reason, Van?"

"No, guess not. In fact, Mrs. Porrance, we never thought of being asked for any. At least I did not myself."

"You did not?"

"Certainly not. Sometimes I may bring my game here, sometimes not. It's for me to say which."

And Van turned away with the air of a man of thirty bored with a useless piece of business.

Even Sol was astonished. He had not given Van credit for as much as that, overlooking the fact that Van was absolutely right.

Mrs. Porrance did not. She was too cute for that. She saw her blunder, and it only made her more and more wrathful over the events of the day. Well was it for Almira that there was nothing especial for her mother to find fault with that afternoon and evening.

"Van," said Sol, as they reached their room, "you spiked her guns."

"Did I? Well, I mean they shall stay spiked. She won't ask any more questions of that kind. At least she won't ask them with that tone of voice and that look on her face."

That was what was the matter.

Mrs. Porrance had tried on a bit of "authority" in the wrong spot, and it had broken all to bits. A great many strong-minded people make that very mistake, and they are curiously

apt to make it with boys of that sort and that age.

And Van Rivington had not told Mrs. Porrance a word of one other thing.

Mrs. Belden had met him and Sol on her way across the green, and she had said to them, with a much sweeter smile than she had given Mrs. Porrance, the larger half of it going to Van's share rather than Sol's :

"They were beautiful fish. If you ever again have more than you know what to do with ——"

"Oh, we will know where to send them," politely responded Van.

"I have thanked your landlady already, but it is only fair I should thank the fishermen. Do you go far for them?"

Van told her several good places for fishing, and Sol added :

"Yes, Mrs. Belden; but if I were you I'd never take the trouble to go for them myself. I'd send a couple of academy boys."

"They're not all polite enough to go. We would be glad to have you come and hear Mr. Belden preach. You'd scarcely care for our sewing society, I suppose?"

"Rather go a-fishing," said Sol, shaking his head ; but the minister's wife only laughed and walked on.

So it came to pass that Sol and Van, and Pat, too, for that matter, began to find themselves very well known boys in Bunkerville. They were making friends as well as enemies, but it was yet too soon to say which way the balance was turning. The Hinckley crowd was a pretty numerous one, and they had busy tongues of their own.

Mrs. Porrance felt herself to be a woman of too much importance to quarrel with a "parcel of boys" about either birds or fish, and she felt sure she had lost nothing in the good opinion of her neighbors.

Her daughter, however, was a different being, and for several days she eyed Sol and Pat with anything but looks of admiration. As for Van, he was too good-looking, and his father was reputed to be too rich for a Bunkerville hostess to be very hard on him.

During that time, too, owing to extra care in handling the pump, but little milk, not enough

to speak of, had been wasted on the floor of the milk-room. Almira was sure she missed some from the pans, but not so much as before, and the count of her eggs was all right.

It was so much easier for the boys to collect "rent eggs" from the neighbors' hens at the barn.

There was another shock coming, however, and one fine morning Almira sailed into the kitchen from her visit to the hen-house with:

"Mother, one of 'em's gone!"

"Gone? Nonsense. Are you sure he went to roost last night?"

"Sure as I'm alive; I locked them all in. He was one of the best of the lot. Just right for a Thanksgiving rooster."

"You don't tell me! Well, it's of a piece with that milk-room. I'll lock it myself, as I did that, and we'll see."

"The milk goes yet, if the eggs don't," whimpered Almira.

"I don't believe it. Why don't they take one when they take the other? I'll fix it so they can't get in."

She was as good as her word, but the trouble was that nobody wanted to get in.

A bit of an "air-hole," not more than a foot square, that no human being could ever have crawled through, was quite enough for the genius of Sol Rogers.

A stick with a running noose at the end of it had been all the fate Almira's feathered fatling required. The noose went over his poor head. It was drawn tight with a jerk. The next moment, unable even to squawk, he was pulled through the little window and it was all over with him.

"Stealing is wicked," said Sol, as he wrung the neck of that unlucky fowl, "but we've paid for this one a good many times over. About half the chickens in that coop belong to us, of right."

"We'll only take 'em one at a time," said Van. "I care more for mince pies than I do for chickens."

There was likely to be a bigger mystery around the hen-house than even the milk-room itself.

Meantime, the preparations for the Sligo donation party went on at a comfortable rate.

Mrs. Porrance was just the woman to make

pie-meat go as far as the laws of cookery would allow. The apples and dough were her own, and she could rightfully put as much in as she pleased. If her allowance, therefore, was set down for her at twenty pies, and if, as was the case, the butcher were at all liberal with his beef, the count was sure to run over in a way to leave a handsome remainder on the swing-shelf in the cellar.

The donation was set down for Monday evening of the following week, so that there was plenty of time for operations after baking-day. And the boys had begun their work in good season.

Van worried a little over the lock of the cellar-door.

"They go in on the inside," he said to Sol, "and they don't often open this outside affair. If they did, though, Mrs. Porrance 'd wonder why the old lock doesn't creak."

"Have you tried it?"

"Of course. The oil has soaked in well, and it runs as easy as a Latin noun. The key I bought for it of old Martin didn't need much filing to fit it."

"It's worse than milk, or eggs, or chickens. Don't you think so?"

"Not a bit of it. The donation won't suffer. We must have some kind of game cooked for that. We can have it done up at the tavern and sent over cold. These are our pies."

"When we get 'em."

"We'll get all we want of 'em. She's cutting us down worse than ever just now."

"Won't I be glad when she kills her pigs!"

"Won't she sell the pork?"

"A good deal of it. But all the valley kills its pigs about the same time, so there's a good deal she can't even give away. We'll get all that."

"We can eat it."

"Yes," said Sol, "all she doesn't corn, in one way or another."

That was on Friday, and the boys had announced their intention of going to the hills the next day.

For reasons of her own, Mrs. Porrance had very cordially offered Pat his time to go with them, and half astonished them all by adding:

"You'd better take one of the ponies and the

old buggy. You can go as far as you please, then, and you won't get so tired coming home."

She received the heartiest kind of thanks for that, but when the boys returned to their own room Sol exclaimed :

"Isn't she cute? She's put a mortgage on us."

"A pony mortgage," said Van.

"Yes. She means we shall feel under obligations to bring all we get right here."

"Oh, we'll do the right thing by her. She'll be paid for the pony if we have any sort of luck."

"But how about the pies?"

"The pony business hasn't anything to do with them. He can't eat mince pies."

"He's a good one, though. It'll be ever so much better than begging lifts and catching rides."

"Well, it will."

The widow and her daughter had had a hard day's work in their kitchen, and they not only went to bed early, but they slept soundly.

The former, indeed, lay awake for a few moments after she went to bed, counting over her

pies, remembering how carefully she had locked up everything, and hoping the boys would bring home as much as possible the next day ; but just as she got to the question as to whether she would prefer fish or partridges, she dropped off into a heavy slumber.

She did not afterwards have so much as a dream concerning the fate of the pies she had so carefully locked up.

That, too, when Almira was almost in a nightmare about the hen-roost and milk-room.

A very excellent cellar was that of the Widow Porrance.

It was long, deep, dark, cool and dry. It extended the entire length and width of the main part of the house, and the swing-shelf in the centre ran very nearly from end to end of it. The flight of stairs down from the dining-room had a locked door at the bottom and another at the top. It was as safe as safe could be but for one thing.

That was the double sloping door at the top of the steps leading to the outer air. This, too, should have been safe, with its hasp and padlock without and its iron bolt within.

Mrs. Porrance had not a doubt of it, but she might have felt differently if Van Rivington had shown her what great things a key would do for the lock, and a bit of wire, through a crack, for the bolt.

She had not so much as examined them, or she might have wondered who had wasted so much good oil on them.

"Boys," said Sol Rogers, as they began to pull the rope-ladder out of its hiding-place, "are we sure just how many of those pies are due to the donation?"

"Twenty," said Pat. "I've heard 'em say it half a dozen times."

"Then that's all we must leave her. The rest are ours."

"It's our duty," said Van. "It's a matter of conscience. We mustn't let her make anything out of old Sligo."

"Nor out of us, either, if we can help it. Silence, now. Pat, you and Van talk too much. Why can't you imitate me?"

They held their tongues, at all events, even after they found themselves on the grass below the window.

It was a dark night, but Van insisted on their closing the cellar-door behind them.

"A candle doesn't give much light," he said, "but the neighbors might be curious. We won't light up till we get inside."

If they had been so many cats they could not have been more stealthy and noiseless, till they all stood under the swing-shelf.

It was beyond their reach.

"How'll we ever work it?" said Pat.

"You mount on my shoulders and hand 'em down to Sol. Leave her twenty."

"Can you hold me up?"

"Long enough for that. Quick!"

Van did not overestimate his strength of legs and shoulders, and the other two were just the boys for the work.

"There's just twenty left now," said Pat, as he held up the candle and counted, while Sol gazed at what he had on the floor.

"And here's eleven. What a wicked old woman!" whispered Sol.

"Down with you, Pat. We must put back the plates," said Van.

"What for, then?"

"We've never paid for any plates. It's the pies are ours. That's all."

"Honesty is the best policy," remarked Sol; "but we won't mash 'em. We'll carry 'em to our room first. We can bring back the plates."

That was so, but it required no little nerve and coolness to get all that choice plunder safely up the rope-ladder. That done, it was easy to slide the pies off upon sheets of buttered writing-paper and pack them away in Sol's trunk, along with the other mysteries of their cooking apparatus.

"Mustn't eat too many to-night," said Van, "or we'll have no luck to-morrow. I wish we could wash the plates, but we can't."

And they did not, but they put them all back in good order on the swing-shelf, and Van even took a broom along and carefully obliterated every trace of their footsteps.

It cost him no end of trouble to slide the inner bolt of the cellar-door again, but he made out to do it, and so left as big a puzzle behind him as he knew how.

"Wonder what she'll say to those empty plates?" said Pat, between two mouthfuls of pie,

after the job was done and the rope-ladder drawn in.

"She won't see 'em for a day or two, and it'll be too late to say much then," replied Van. "She and Almira won't be at home to-morrow, after we get away, and next day'll be Sunday."

"We'll have mince pie for lunch in the woods, anyhow," said Sol; "and they won't be donation pies, either."

"No," said Van, "we've left all those in the cellar. But we must send our share to Sligo. He doesn't get any too much to eat. Country ministers never do."

There is no denying it, those three boys did an unusual amount of first-class dreaming that night.

That was a splendid Saturday morning, and Mrs. Porrance very kindly had breakfast earlier than usual, although she gave no reason for the special interest she seemed to be taking in the expected sport.

As for the boys, dreams or no dreams, they had been ready since before daylight, and the pony, with the buggy behind him, was already hitched in front of the door.

Once upon a time, it may be, that buggy had had a top to it; but now, alas! it was only an open wagon, with a seat in the middle, and plenty of room for guns and game.

"The very thing for us," Van had said. "We could almost run it through the woods."

Their careful counsels had settled the day's geography a little uncertainly.

They were to try Ragged Gap, or the neighborhood thereof, for pigeons or any other game. After that they would drive rapidly to a bit of a lake at the foot of the mountains, and see what they could catch.

They had no notion of setting out for home before sunset, and small care as to how late it might be when they should get in.

The drive out was a rapid one, and the pony seemed to enjoy it, for he had had little to do of late, and was a likely sort of a fellow.

When they reached it, they turned at once into the "wood-road" toward the old log-house, and were not a little surprised by the tokens of occupancy which greeted them when they came out into the clearing.

"Settlers here," said Sol.

"No game, then," replied Van. "We'll make the best of our way to the lake. May shoot something there."

"Faith, it's a queer place to settle in," grumbled Pat; and so it was, but neither the settlers nor their dogs were on the premises just then.

Perhaps because they had something better to attend to.

The lake was but three miles further, and the road to it was only half as bad as it might have been. The boys were able to bring their buggy within watching distance, and unhitched their pony for a feed and a rest.

It seemed to them as if they had never before gone at a day's fishing quite so much as a matter of business, but they took care to load their guns before they began.

"What's that you're putting in that cannon of yours, Pat?" asked Sol.

"Only three or four loose buckshot I had in my pocket. There's not enough of them to hurt anything."

It ought to have been a fair day for fish, but they came a trifle slowly at first, except the

"pumpkin-seeds," and there were only too many of them.

"Slathers of 'em," said Sol.

"They're a nate fish," said Pat ; "but they're coming along too aisy."

"Never mind, boys," began Van, but just then a sound of something crashing through the underbrush on the hillside behind him made him exclaim, "Hist, boys ! Your guns ! What's that ?"

"Something bigger'n a squirrel," said Sol. "I'm ready, if it's an elephant."

Pat Nolan's long-barreled concern was at his shoulder in an instant, and his rod and line lay by him on the grass with a fine perch flopping at the hook of it.

In a minute or so more the mystery was solved, as a very respectable-looking buck came bounding out from among the trees and halted for a wild look at them on a little knoll at no great distance.

Bang ! bang ! bang ! but the bird-shot would have been of small service against such game if it had not been for the heavier bits of lead in Pat Nolan's charge.

These, indeed, went "clean home," and the buck gave a convulsive spring toward the water.

Poor fellow ! He staggered heavily before he reached the margin, and even the "number sixes" in the second barrels were good enough to finish him with, as Sol and Van rushed forward.

"Cut his throat," shouted Sol. "They always do that, and mine's a long blade. Sharp, too."

Not very scientifically done, but well enough, and the boys were so ungovernably excited by their unexpected adventure that they did not let go of that buck till they had dragged and hoisted him into the rear end of the buggy-box.

"Somebody was chasing him."

"He must have got away, then."

"Haven't heard any dogs."

"Lost the scent, may be."

Just then the sound of distant baying came faintly to their ears, and before long it drew nearer and nearer, till at last a couple of panting hounds dashed in sight along the trail of the deer they were not to "run down."

If he had reached the little lake and swam across it he would have been safe from them,



"CUT HIS THROAT," SHOUTED SOL

and he was, therefore, fairly the game of the three boys.

The hounds seemed to think so, for, after smelling and lapping around the spot where the buck had fallen, and whimpering at the buggy and its contents, they sat down and howled for a moment dismally.

"They'll bring their owners," said Sol.

"Can't help that," coolly remarked Van. "There'll be venison at the donation party if we have to take in some dog-meat with it. Load up."

"Sure and you're a captain," muttered Pat, as he did so.

And then he proceeded to remove the perch from his hook and throw in again.

"There won't be any more deer, but there may be some fish."

The other two promptly followed his example, and it was a good twenty minutes and more after that, with half a dozen fine fish pulled in, before the "owners" came in sight, even more completely out of breath than their dogs had been.

They were the squatters of the old log-cabin,

and an angry pair were they when the facts of the case dawned upon them.

“What are you doing with our deer?”

“Haven’t seen any of your cattle of any kind,” remarked Sol Rogers. “What do you mean?”

“We don’t run down deer for boys to murder, we don’t.”

“I wouldn’t, then, if I were you. Keep your dogs away from our deer, that’s all.”

“None of yer sass.”

“Look here,” said Van Rivington, rising to his feet. “What on earth do you mean? Do you claim that buck?”

“Wall, we do.”

“Claim it, then. My name’s Rivington. I’m good for it. But if you lay a finger on anything in my buggy I’ll send a constable after you.”

That was pretty well for a boy of fifteen, but he evidently meant every word of it, and Pat and Sol sat on the grass with their guns across their laps in a way that did not offer the slightest encouragement.

The two squatters looked at the boys and at one another.

A constable was just the sort of man they did not care to become too well acquainted with.

Then they looked longingly at the buck in the buggy.

"Tell you what," exclaimed one. "If you fellers 'll give us a fore-quarter, we'll butcher it all up for ye and call it square."

"All right," said Van; "we'll go it."

"What kin you boys do with the hide? We can use it now."

"You can have that, but the horns are ours."

"That's a bargain, then."

And at it they went with their bowie-knives, in a way that looked as if they had cut up venison before.

"It's all right, Van," said Sol. "You're captain. Saves us trouble, too."

The squatters were as good as their word, and as soon as their job was done they were off, dogs and all, leaving the boys to their fishing.

It took a good deal of steady nerve to go on with so quiet a sort of business, after such an achievement as bringing down a deer, but Van

insisted, and their several "strings" grew rapidly, only the large fish were a trifle scarce on them.

"Time!" shouted Van, at last. "We've a good distance to drive, and it won't do to rush the pony."

Time it was, and a proud trio were they, as they drew nearer and nearer the streets of Bunkerville.

"The donation, Van," said Sol. "We mustn't change our minds."

"I move we do the big thing, boys."

"How's that?" asked Pat.

"Only take home the fore-quarter that's left. We'll have the whole haunch roasted at the tavern and sent to Sligo's for a cold cut. It'll make 'em open their eyes."

"Think of the pies, Van."

"If we hadn't paid for 'em before, we're doing it now."

And so they drove in, straight to the door of the village tavern, where the story of their luck brought around the buggy not only the landlord, but a swarm of idlers and a storm of hunting talk.

"Goin' to take it to the widder's, I reckon?" asked the landlord.

Van explained his wishes and asked what the expense would be.

"What'll I charge you boys to cook a haunch o' deer-meat for Parson Sligo's donation? Wall, if that ain't heavy! Charge ye! I say, neow. Wall you wait till I send in my bill. I'll hev it sot up fur ye in prime style. You see 'f I don't. You're a lot o' young bricks, you are. It's a tip-top haunch, too. Hope it's goin' to be a good huntin' season."

"All right, then," said Sol Rogers. "We're going to eat the rest of it."

"Are ye? Wall, I hope so. But you've ketched more sunfish 'n anything else. They ain't a bad brile."

"Good-night," said Van, and Pat gave the pony the reins.

Every one of them was in doubt as to how Mrs. Porrance would regard the disposition they had made of their game, but they did not rightly understand, as yet, the manner of woman they were dealing with.

She heard them all through while she was

punching that fore-quarter of venison and examining the fish.

“Left it at the tavern to be roasted, you young scamps! Afraid I didn’t know how, I suppose? Well, if I couldn’t beat any cook they’ve got! But you’re only boys. I hope they won’t spoil it.”

As if so clear-headed a woman as the widow would have opposed the sending of a “cold cut” to the donation of her own minister! What really stung her was that so fine a present was not to go from her own house, but there was no good way of saying so.

Even Almira could only repeat after her mother:

“I hope it won’t be spoiled.” And the latter added:

“The fish ’ll be fine for breakfast;—the pumpkin-seeds. We’ll bring on the rest at dinner-time.”

CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTERY OF THE CABIN EXPLAINED

"MR. SLIGO," said his little wife to him, that evening, "those boys ——"

"What boys, my dear?"

"That board with the Widow Porrance. Have they been invited to the donation?"

"I don't know. She ought to bring them."

"She won't, then. I'll see to it myself. They're strangers, and they'd never come unless they were asked."

"Most of the young folks here 'll be older than they are."

"Husband, boys of that age feel as old as you do. And those three are no common boys, I can tell you."

Down at the tavern, at the same time, quite a crowd of fellows were busily discussing "the first buck of the season," whose haunches hung over the bar, surmounted by the antlers, and labeled, "For the Donation Party."

Prominent among the talkers was Pat Nolan's

friend, the stage-driver, "Denis Mullaly, from Limerick," fit to burst with pride over the fact that "a bit of a red-headed Irish boy" had helped bring in such a trophy as that.

Pat was all Irish to him, in spite of the fact that he was born in the old Fourth Ward of New York. In fact, that was just as good as Limerick, so far as nationality went.

As for the boys themselves, their supper had not been a bad one, but they found room left within them for one of those mince pies. That helped them dream of endless hunts and of stags with impossible antlers by their valiant hands brought down.

At the next morning's breakfast-table it was made to appear not only that sunfish make "a good brile," but that a marvelous number of them can be eaten by one middle-aged woman, one young one, and the three gentlemen who caught the fish.

"Plenty of 'em left for dinner—mostly the big ones," said Mrs. Porrance, and her boarders went to church wondering what they would do with fish and venison at the same meal. Before they returned they had been cornered on the

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green by Mrs. Sligo and cordially invited to the Monday evening's entertainment.

They had also received a most encouraging bow and smile from that excellent woman, Mrs. Belden.

"We'll send her some more fish some day," remarked Sol Rogers.

The dinner question continued to puzzle them, however, until they got into the house.

House, indeed ! but what a house !

For once it could fairly be called a full house, and the three made the best of their way to their own room.

"That's it," said Van, "but I don't quite see through it."

"Don't you?" said Sol. "Well, I do, then. She doesn't often have mince pies, venison, fish and all that, at once, and no cost but the cooking. So she's invited all the country people she had room for. They're awful eaters."

"Queer-looking lot."

"Farmers' wives and sisters and aunts. Mighty few men, I notice. One good thing, they'll all feel bound to send her in something nice before Christmas."

"Something she can't sell?"

"Something good to eat. It's a way they have up here."

"We'll take care of all they send. But, Sol, there's fun coming."

So there was, but just then the most noticeable thing in the house was the beautiful odor from the kitchen, which was creeping all over it and helping every one who had a good nose, to get hungry.

"She's a tip-top cook," said Sol.

Dinner was a trifle late to the great advantage of all appetites, but at last the bell rung.

What a crowd! and how gracefully Almira introduced to them her mother's two boarders while poor Pat was helping to bring in the dinner!

That was nothing, for even some of the guests had helped the widow with her extra work.

No style or nonsense among them; not even in managing the table, for fish and all came on together.

There was one dangerous point, while a gray-headed elder was saying grace, but his wife sat next to him and pinched him to stop before things could cool materially.

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It was a good dinner, and there was an abundance of it, for Mrs. Porrance had extravagantly added a fat chicken, and all concerned looked beamingly at the widow and wished in their hearts she would remember to ask them every Sunday they came to town.

Such dinners have a great effect on church-going in country villages, and there ought to be a "Society" to cultivate them.

Mr. Sligo must have preached a remarkably good sermon that morning, for the old ladies all said so when they passed their plates a second time. Nevertheless, there was more silence than one would have looked for. It was the dinner did that.

Sol Rogers himself worked away quietly, until, at last, Miss Almira suddenly dropped her knife and fork, exclaiming:

"Mother, I declare!"

"What is it, Almira?"

"I forgot to warm the mince pies."

"So did I, then. What a pity!"

"There it comes, Van," whispered Sol; "I knew it."

But a dozen voices were loudly protesting that

mince pies were decidedly to be preferred cold, and they always ate them that way at home.

"Then, Almira, while we're clearing the table, you and Pat go down and bring them up."

Pat did not dare to look his friends in the face, as he silently followed the landlady's daughter, but Sol again whispered :

"Van, his hair's turning red."

"Is yours turning gray?"

"No ; but I'm a trifle chilly."

Almira took down cellar with her a stout wooden stool to stand on, while she should hand down the pies to Patrick from the shelf.

The light was dim and no candle was carried, so that the calamity came suddenly.

"Miss Almira, this 'ere plate's as empty as it was born."

"Empty? How can that be?"

"No pie," said Pat.

"Here's another ——"

"That's as clean as if you'd washed it. Did you really ever have any pies up there?"

Almira was standing on tiptoe now, and craning her long neck forward. Her eyes were more accustomed to the light by this time, and in

an instant she comprehended the full extent of the disaster which had befallen the dinner and the donation. That is, one or the other of them.

"Only part of 'em gone," she said, faintly, after one loud, shrill cry of astonishment and alarm. "But who could have taken them?"

"Somebody stolen 'em, I guess," said Pat.

That cry had been heard in the dining-room, however, and Mrs. Porrance sprang to the head of the cellar-stairs, followed by three or four of her old lady friends.

"She's fell down."

"Hurt herself?"

"The stool give way?"

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Porrance; "something's gone wrong with the pies."

Sol and Van sat calmly in their chairs, awaiting the inevitable result.

Almira met her mother half-way with her report, but the widow passed on down and did not pause until she had made a minute examination of that cellar.

"No," she said to herself, "nobody got in through that outside door, for the bolt's in its

place all right. No more could they have got in through the house. I give it up. It makes me shiver all over. Those boys? No, they just couldn't have done it, and that's all."

Nevertheless, the only thing left for her to tell her guests was that her pies had been stolen.

"I'll have some for you next Sunday, though," she added, desperately, "and I want you all to be here."

"Mrs. Porrance," remarked Van, with easy politeness, "I promise you, Sol and Pat and I will do our part."

That was a splendid promise.

Suspect those boys of the pies after that? No, indeed.

The widow's face wore a smile of positive gratitude while her guests loudly protested that they had one and all eaten so much already that they had no room for pie.

"It was the solemn truth, too," said Sol to Van, after they got up-stairs.

"Now let's warm up one of those pies and see what we can do with it."

They did with it, helped a little by Pat Nolan ;

but the latter told them the pie business was weighing heavily on the mind of the widow.

It was just as well for Mrs. Porrance and her peace of mind, and for the comfort of the nearly distracted Almira, that several of those Sunday guests remained over, with a view of attending the Sligo donation party.

Both mother and daughter were thereby supplied with talk and company, so that the blow they had received was lightened of some of its effects.

To tell the truth, the widow regarded herself, and was looked upon by others, as a leading member of that church, and she felt in no small degree responsible for its well-being. No other woman or man was better posted on its history, its present condition, and the average conduct of its brethren and sisters. She was ready to listen calmly to all the news that came concerning any of them.

It is not to be supposed that she had forgotten her boarders in connection with the donation party, but the experiment of inviting academy boys to donations, and that sort of thing,

was one that had been much tried and very thoroughly given up.

This did not include the full-grown students of either sex, if they amounted to anything socially, but "boys were boys," and they had proved it so often that even Mrs. Porrance did not dare step over the rule.

She might have asked Van, but how then could she omit Sol? And if Sol, why not Pat Nolan?

She thought it all over, and would have had no difficulty about her decision if it had not been for that haunch of venison.

The deer-meat troubled her, and there is no telling what the result might have been but for the loss of her pies and the coming of her guests.

Both together drove the invitation business out of her mind until it was too late.

She was rejoiced over her ability to deliver her full number of pies, for her reputation as a cook was at stake, and she well knew the capacity of her neighbors for making remarks.

There would be a crowd, she knew that, and a hungry one, likely to count everything that came, to the last pie and doughnut.

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There were several other congregations in Bunkerville, but none of them were too narrow to send their ministers and some of their deacons to any place where there was to be plenty to eat. They were even ready to help the supplies.

It was therefore a good thing that the Sligo parsonage, though only a story and a half high, had a good deal of room on the ground floor. To be sure, it was only half finished, but that was a fault which could be remedied for the occasion, as Pat Nolan found after school that Monday.

“They’ll all be able to sit down, boys,” he remarked to his friends, “and the tables’ll be everywhere.”

The only really elegant article of furniture possessed by little Mrs. Sligo was her piano, and that was a treasure she rarely opened before company, although both she and her husband had been called “musical” before they had so many children and so much church on their hands.

“Boys,” said Sol, as they walked across the green that afternoon, “we must make a ten-strike to-night. How’ll we work it?”

"They've got a piano," said Pat. "I saw it this morning."

"Pat, can you sing?" asked Van.

"'Deed and I can. Something they never heard."

"What's that?"

"Irish, then. The real old sort. And three or four Dutch songs besides."

"And I can give 'em French and Italian. Some of it I don't quite understand myself, but I can sing it."

"He can play the piano, too," said Sol; "but what can I do? I've no more music than a pump."

"You can stand by and see fair play," laughed Van.

Little he knew how important a matter that might be, for no one had told him—how should they?—that Mr. Sligo had formerly been pastor of a church in which Mrs. Hinekley was a member, and that the good, soft-hearted man had invited the two boys, for their mother's sake.

"We'll work it, then," said Van, "if we can only overcome our bashfulness."

"I can help you there," remarked Sol Rogers,

with the air of a man who had suddenly discovered precisely what he was good for.

The supper at Mrs. Porrance's was a little "thin" that day; but that was of small consequence, considering what was coming.

All the people who were bound for the donation ate light suppers, as a matter of course.

Afterwards Sol and Van strolled down to the tavern to take a look at that haunch of venison before it was sent over, and to bring home the antlers.

Mrs. Porrance had errands for Pat. These could not last forever, and by and by he was able to join his friends and get their help in dressing for the evening.

Never in all his life had he been in such an excitement, but he concealed it heroically.

It was to be his first social appearance as "a gentleman," and he was already thinking of the account he would send of it to his mother and Mr. Maguire.

As for Sol, it was an old story told over, and Van Rivington was not the sort of man to be startled by anything that could be sprung upon him out in Bunkerville. There is something in

being a city boy, after all, much as that point has been disputed.

Still, there was any amount of blacking boots, and tying neckties, and brushing clothes and hair, and asking one another, "How'll that do, eh?" before the three felt themselves ready to face the music.

They had meant to be on hand early, but it was a good eight o'clock before Mrs. Porrance saw Parson Sligo shaking hands with them.

"That's a splendid haunch of venison, my dear young friends. You must tell me about the killing of it. Mrs. Sligo, they've come."

"And I was so afraid they would not," exclaimed the pallid little lady, as she bustled forward. "Now, do try and enjoy yourselves."

"Thank you," said Van; "I am quite sure we will."

"Mrs. Sligo," said Sol, "where did all the people come from? Did Mrs. Porrance borrow any of them?"

"No, you naughty boy. They're all good, friendly people, and we are very glad to see them."

Just then other guests demanded the attention

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of both her husband and herself ; but Van Rivington had caught the expression of astonishment on Mrs. Porrance's face, and he sent a low bow to her clear across the room. A cool hand was Van, and both Sol and Pat had taken their cue from him.

"We must back him right through," said Sol. "You wouldn't go back on a captain like that, would you, Patrick Nolan?"

"Is it go back on him? Wouldn't I stale the piano if he said it? Wait, now, and see what he'll do next."

Miss Almira was just then at the piano, and to Sol's astonishment the intellectual editor of the Bunkerville *Clarion* was at her side.

"You forget," said Van, "he printed her poetry last week and gave her a puff. She thinks he's a genius now. But who ever thought she knew enough to play so badly as that? It isn't everybody would dare to."

"Hush, she's getting up, and they're pulling forward Mrs. Sligo. Let's see how she does it."

"Come on, Sol. Come, Pat. We must stand by her. She's half scared to death."

Mrs. Porrance would have said, "The impu-

dent young scamps!" if she had overheard them, but Mrs. Sligo was really not a bad performer, and she had to plead her other duties quite firmly in order to get away at the end of her "piece."

Mrs. Porrance herself had played landlady and hostess in one, from the beginning of the evening, so that the minister's wife would not have been much missed, especially as everybody was eating who could get at the tables, or had not already had all they could stow away.

Mrs. Belden was there, and had thanked the widow again for "those beautiful fish," but she was now close at Van Rivington's elbow.

"Do you not play? I'm quite sure you do."

"Indeed, Mrs. Belden ——"

"Sit right down. I insist upon it. Give us something we never heard before."

Van had not the slightest intention of resisting, and in a moment more he was running his fingers over the keys, hunting for an accompaniment for what he knew was coming from Pat Nolan.

"Now, Pat, will that do?"

"Start it. I'll run the risk."

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Pat's voice had a tremor in it when he began, but it was a sweet one, and he was brimful of the fun of the thing.

Van banged away for dear life at the accompaniment, and the way the crowd began to pack around that piano threatened to crush the inside people.

"What can it be?" said Mrs. Sligo.

"Italian, of course," said Almira.

"Scarcely that, but it's not German."

"Never heard it before," said the minister himself. "There, now, that's German. How well he sings!"

Mrs. Porrance had felt the color rising to her face when her boarders took possession of the piano.

That had been with vexation, but now she was as redly flushed with pride, and looked around her, as much as to say:

"Do you hear that? Those boys board with me. And it was they that killed the buck."

Great was the curiosity and excitement, for now Van himself struck in with a French air, in the chorus of which Pat helped him. Then a brief dose of Italian opera was thrown in, then

something else, everything by turns, and nothing long, till Pat got back to his Irish, and Sol was ready to burst, with an envious wish that he could sing.

The applause was almost continuous, and the only people who did not join in it were Bob and Joe Hinckley, who had been drawn out of the supper-room by the strange music and Dr. Betts himself.

The former were whispering together in a way that boded no good, but the dignified academy principal was standing in a corner, muttering to himself :

“I’ve had a good many boys at Bunker Academy, and others before ever I came here, but I never got hold of such a lot as that. Yes, they could have managed the hornet affair. If they couldn’t, nobody could. I’ll get at the bottom of it yet. Hello!”

The last exclamation was called forth by an operation performed by Bob Hinckley, and Dr. Betts quickly added :

“Whatever it was Sol Rogers was too sharp for them. I must keep my eyes open. Something will come of it before the evening’s over.”

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Sol Rogers had indeed been on guard, with a pair of eyes in his head that not a great many things were likely to escape. Least of all, anything attempted by Bob or Joe, or any of their set.

"It was well we invited them," said Mrs. Sligo to her husband.

"The best thing of the evening, by all odds. But they must have some supper."

That was kind of him, and the boys fully appreciated it. Not only were they hungry, but they had about sung themselves out for that one pull.

Bitterer and bitterer grew the jealousy of Bob and Joe Hinckley, and they followed their intended victims into the supper-room with an ill-concealed chuckle that did not escape the eyes of Dr. Betts.

"Mischief coming, but I can't see what."

The supper-room was pretty warm, but there was not so great a crowd in it just now, and people could see what other people were doing.

Most were eating.

Mrs. Porrance's three boarders were bountifully helped to slices of their own venison, and

they wondered if she could really have done any better by it than the cook at the tavern.

It was simply "prime."

Coffee, mince pie, pumpkin pie, and every other kind of pie; doughnuts, and cold fowl of every kind; there was no denying that the Bunkerville neighbors had dealt liberally with Parson Sligo's donation. No, nor that Van and his two friends did justice to the good things placed before them.

"Joe," said Bob Hinckley, at last, "Sol Rogers is wiping his face."

"We've got 'em then. But ain't I warm!"

"So am I. There's Van; Pat, too. They'll be a nice looking lot."

Very clean and white were the pocket-handkerchiefs produced and used by the three friends, and Bob and Joe looked on with suppressed chuckles, as if waiting for something which must shortly come.

They waited and waited.

"Bob," said Joe, "what's the matter?"

"Mistake, somewhere."

And he wiped his own perspiring forehead vigorously as he said it.

"Joe Hinckley!"

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“Bob! Gracious!”

“Master Hinckley,” suddenly broke in the deep, sonorous voice of Dr. Betts, “what have you and your brother being doing to your faces? It is disgraceful.”

“Look at ’em, Van,” remarked Sol, across the table. “That’s the sort of trap they laid for us.”

“Powdered nutgalls, and all that sort of thing. I understand it.”

“Made zebras of themselves,” said Pat Nolan. “Oh, but ain’t they streaked! Will it come off?”

“Not easy.”

But Dr. Betts understood the whole matter now, and the two brothers were hurried out of the house with a flea in their ears, and an appointment for the next morning at the house of the academy principal.

Such a little incident as that scarcely made a ripple on the busy surface of the donation party, and before long Pat and Van, with Sol to “encourage” them, as he called it, were dragged back to the piano.

Take it all in all, deer-meat, singing, Sol’s fun,

Van's good looks, Pat Nolan's red hair, and that evening was a species of triumphs for Mrs. Porrance's boarders.

The good lady herself kept as near them as she well could, and Miss Almira found herself so far gone, before she knew it, that she actually smiled on Patrick.

"Arrah," said he to himself, "what would she and her mother be looking if they knew about the pies? And me own dear mother! Wouldn't I like to see her face come in at the door? This is better'n carrying home washin', or even groceries for old Maguire. It's glad I am to be rid of that same."

And yet he might have done worse than even that.

The two Hinckley boys had a tough time of it with Dr. Betts the next evening. There was no end to the good advice and sharp warnings he gave them.

They did not, however, put in an appearance at the academy again for two or three days more. There was too much of what Pat Nolan called "zebra" on their faces, in spite of all they

could do to get it off. Their intended practical joke had been woefully turned against them.

It was just as well for their own comfort, perhaps, that they were not made witnesses of the sudden celebrity of the objects of their jealous dislike. Boys will make a hero out of almost anything, and the younger students of Bunker Academy were disposed to make all that was possible out of Sol and Van and Pat.

It was quite likely, as a consequence, that the three would scarcely be as popular with their seniors.

All the worse because the girl half of the academy seemed inclined to do any amount of smiling in the matter.

"Van," said Sol, "you get more than your share, but I've caught three girls smiling on me to-day, and I heard one of them say she likes red hair. That means Pat."

"Pat," said Van, "have your hair dyed at once."

"And lose all me good looks? What would me mother say?"

"Your mother? Do you suppose she wouldn't

have you protect yourself? If you were as homely as Sol, now ——”

“Me?” exclaimed Sol. “Van, I’m going to write some verses for the *Clarion*.”

“You? Well, if you will I’ll agree to read every word of them. What’ll you write about?”

“Can’t say just yet. I’m piling up a stock of rhymes before I begin. Must jingle, you know.”

“That’s so; but, boys, what on earth’ll we do next?”

“Study,” said Sol, gravely.

“Of course we will,” said Pat.

“Of course,” said Van, “but we’ve managed to keep things pretty lively ever since we came, and I can’t exactly make up my mind to be quiet.”

“Quiet? Not a bit of it. Let’s think it over.”

“Anyhow, Sol, we’ll have a hunt next Saturday if it doesn’t rain. Let’s try the Gap for a string of pigeons.”

“And squirrels.”

“And that makes me think,” said Pat Nolan, “of a thing that happened to me day before yesterday ——”

"And you never told us, Pat?"

"Oh, the donation and lots of other things drove it out of my head. I saw one of those Gap fellows."

"The squatters?"

"The cabin men that started our buck for us."

"Did you?" exclaimed Van. "Now, I want to hear it. Tell it, Pat."

And tell it he did, in his own way, in spite of numberless interruptions of all sorts, but the substance of it was this:

Pat had been out on one of his many errands for Mrs. Porrance when he had been hailed by a rough-looking fellow whom he recognized as one of the Gap squatters.

"Look a-here, youngster! you're just the boy I want."

"What for?"

"I want ye to run up for me into old Martin's and buy some things for me, while I stay here and mind my ponies. Tell ye somethin' worth while if ye will."

"All right. What do you want?"

"A can of rifle-powder and a can of shotgun-powder; caps and lead and shot. There's a list

of 'em, all writ out. And there's the money—all silver. You kin count it; there's more'n enough."

Silver was just beginning to circulate again in Bunkerville, but it was not yet common to have so much of it offered at once.

Like all the rest that came, this was fresh and new—all in half-dollars and quarters. Old Martin filled the list and took the money, without a word of comment, for the reputation Pat and his friends had earned as sportsmen had reached his ears in a somewhat exaggerated form.

There was a little odd change in Pat's hands when he went out with his purchases, and two or three of the half-dollars.

Very much to his astonishment his friend the squatter offered to let him keep it all; but he flatly refused, adding :

"You promised to tell me something."

"So I did. Well, there's lots o' pigeons in the woods by the Gap. Almost like a regular roost. You and your chums could knock over a heap of 'em. They ain't anywhere's nigh the house, though. Keep right on by the old road till you see the Gap, and then go up the slope to the

right. You can't miss 'em. Don't come to the house. My chum's kinder cross-grained, and he don't want no visitors."

"We don't want to see him, that I know of," replied Pat; "but we'll come for those pigeons some day. I'm paid."

And so the squatter had jumped into his wagon and driven off, and Pat had gone about his other business.

If was queer, though, that he had failed to tell Van and Sol. It is just possible that the cause may not have been altogether forgetfulness.

Van evidently had some such idea in his mind, but he said nothing for a full minute.

Even Sol was silent.

"It was all in silver," said Pat. "Of course, I ought to have told you before."

"You said there was a big secret there."

"It's coming out now, I guess," said Van, as he opened his trunk and took out the little white thing he had picked up in the old log shanty the first time they visited it.

"This is Thursday night," he was saying, "and that was on Tuesday. We can't go till next Saturday, and it may rain ——"

But at that moment there came an unusually loud knock at the front door below. So loud it was plainly heard in their room.

"Somebody doesn't care a cent for his knuckles," said Sol.

"Almira's opening the door," remarked Pat, but the next thing he heard was his own name.

"Nolan—Patrick Nolan? Yes, he lives here."

"Is he in?"

"I think so."

"Will you tell him, ma'am, that Denis Mullaly and a friend of his would like to spake wid him?"

"Have him come right up here, Pat," exclaimed Van; "right to our room."

Pat was on the stairs in a twinkling, and before Miss Almira could make up her mind whether or not to object, Denis accepted the invitation, followed by a wiry, muscular, resolute-looking man, whom he introduced as:

"Me friend, Misther Murray, from New York;" adding to him, "I towld ye the three of 'em wud be together."

"I only want Pat," began Murray, but that young gentleman interrupted him with:

"Who is he, Denis? What does he want of me? He can speak it out before the boys."

"May be I won't, then."

"It's a quare piece of worruk," said Denis. "Pat, me boy, did yez iver see that before?"

A couple of bright, new half-dollars lay in the palm of the stage-driver's outstretched hand.

"See 'em? Any fool knows what they are. The like of 'em's everywhere."

"Not just like 'em. Take another look."

"Give me one," remarked Van Rivington, as he helped himself. "I thought so. If the mold hadn't been broken it would have fitted exactly."

"Look here, I say!" almost excitedly exclaimed Murray; "where'd you get that? We've found it, Denis. They are not the chaps that made it, though."

"Are you a detective?" quietly asked Van.

"S'pose I am, what then?"

"What made you come to Pat with that money?"

"What made him?" exclaimed Denis. "Didn't I git it of owld Martin, and didn't I have to say so whin he spotted me wid the same? And when he kim to ask owld Martin, didn't the

thafe go back on Pat and say he tuk it from him ? A whole lot of it. The ownly way was to bring him straight here."

"It's all right," said Van. "We were talking it over when you came in. I guess Mr. Murray had better hear all about it."

"You're a cool hand for a young one," remarked the detective, as he hitched his chair a little nearer. "Whose son are you ?"

Van told him, and there was plainly something reassuring in the information, for he nodded his head, as much as to say :

"That's all right. Your references'll do. Go on."

And go on he did, till Denis Mullaly sprang to his feet with a shout of :

"That clears the b'ys. Oh, Pat, but I'm glad o' that same. Ye're a credit to yer blood. It takes an Irish boy, after all."

"Sit down, Denis," said the detective. "Pat's all right, and so are the other boys. Old Martin'll keep still, and so must you. Boys, when can you make a trip to the Gap ?"

"Saturday. Going to shoot some pigeons," said Van. "They know we're coming."

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“Capital! They’ll never suspect a thing if you have one more along with you. I’ll get a gun of Martin. Just the thing. Is it all right?”

“We’re willing,” said Van.

“Best kind of luck,” replied Murray. “You see, boys, I’m out after a good many more besides these two. If I spring a trap on them too suddenly, you know, I’d only scare all the rest.”

“Of course,” remarked Sol Rogers. “There’s no danger of our doing anything careless. I hope we can trust your prudence, Mr. Murray.”

“And you’re another cool hand,” replied the detective.

Very little more remained to be said, and Denis went away with his friend, the detective, overjoyed at being able to assure old Martin that there was nothing wrong about Pat and his cronies.

“Mr. Rivington,” said Mrs. Porrance, as he closed the front door behind them, “what did those men want—the stage-driver and the other man?”

“Want? Oh, nothing at all, ma’am. The little fellow is to go hunting with us on Saturday,

if it doesn't rain. We mean to show him some pigeons."

"Oh, that's all. Well, I hope you'll bring in a good string. I'll make a splendid pigeon pie if you do."

CHAPTER XII

A BIG PIGEON CAUGHT

THERE had been less of sound sleeping than usual done at Mrs. Porrance's that Thursday night, but the boys went out on Friday with a stern determination to appear "just as if nothing at all had happened."

They succeeded admirably well, too, in spite of the fact that Pat Nolan had a long errand at Martin's gun-shop in the afternoon. The old gunsmith was even more excited than the "red-headed Irish boy."

"It's not the money I care for," he said to Pat; "I'll never say a word to you about that. But you and the other two must do your level best to help Murray cage those rascals. If there's any kind of rogue I hate it's a counterfeiter. They're the enemies of society. Ought to be hunted down like so many wolves."

"I'll do my share," said Pat, and Murray added :

"I believe he will, and you never saw a cooler pair of youngsters than his chums. They'd make detectives, both of 'em. It's the best bit of fun I've had for many a long day, with pigeon-shooting thrown in."

The only special incident of the day at the academy was in the class in history, when Sol Rogers was asked, "What were the consequences of the battle of Waterloo?" and he vaguely answered:

"It made a ragged gap."

"So it did," said Dr. Betts, with a smile. "There was a good deal of shooting done, was there not?"

"Yes," said Sol, bravely; "but they did it on Sunday. We do ours on Saturday."

The class saw that it was safe to laugh, for the doctor himself set the example.

On a whole, that Friday was about as long a day as any the boys could remember, and they ate the last of their mince pies before they went to bed.

"So we won't dream," said Sol.

Dreams or no dreams, however, they were ready for breakfast, with the pony all hitched

up, before breakfast was ready for them, and Murray himself was already loafing listlessly around in front of the house, with a double-barreled gun in his hand.

Miss Almira managed to get a good look at him, but voted him a most unromantic and commonplace sort of being. So much so that it was not worth her while to come to the gate when the sportsmen clambered into the topless buggy and drove away.

"Now, boys," said Murray, "we're in for a big day."

"We mustn't neglect our pigeons, though," said Sol. "There must be a pie at Mother Porrance's to-morrow, or there'll be mourning."

"We will look out for the pie," answered Murray, "I'll give you all I kill."

When they reached the forks where the wood-road branched off towards the log-house, the detective said to his friends :

"Now for some scouting. Van, you come with me. The others can stay here till we get back. I want a look at the shanty."

Very carefully he went for it, too—he and

Van slipping along behind trees and bushes like a pair of red Indians, or as if they were stalking a deer.

It took them longer, therefore, to reach a spot from which they could have a good view of the cabin and the clearing.

"Hist!" whispered Murray to Van; "it's all as you described it, to the last inch. But don't you see? One of 'em's getting ready to go somewhere. He isn't taking the wagon. Only packing that heavy little valise on a horse. Means to lead him through the woods. Don't want any wheels. The other fellow and the dogs'll stay at home. We mustn't go any nearer or the dogs'll scent us. I reckon I understand now. Let's hurry back and make for the Gap. He'll reach it before we will."

Van, too, thought he understood. The distance was too great for close criticism, but it was a queer thing to see two men take hold of so small a thing as that which Murray pronounced to be a valise, and that one of the squatters should lead the horse they put it on right into the woods.

"They wouldn't have done that," said he to

Murray, "if they only meant to bury it somewhere."

"Right, my boy. We'll see what becomes of it. I'll have that load in my hands before I'm a day older. See if I don't."

The results of the "scouting" were freely told to Sol and Pat, and the pony was started for the Gap.

"Not too fast," said Murray; "and you must find a place to hide him before long, so that we can push ahead on foot."

There were stray squads of pigeons now beginning to fly around them, but not a shot was fired.

"Plenty of time for them," said Van. "But what an awfully rough road this is getting to be!"

Less than a mile further and it became plain that they could go faster on foot. A good, shady, safe sort of hollow was therefore picked out. The pony was unhitched, tethered, given a wisp of hay, and left behind. Then the detective and his three assistants pushed forward as if the fate of an army depended on their sagacity and speed.

"We must keep in the woods, boys, and skirt along the road. There's no telling what we may see."

Oh, how temptingly near were some of those pigeons! Squirrels, too, made their appearance. It was hard to give them all up, but it was not long before Pat Nolan, who had gotten a little ahead, turned suddenly and raised his hand.

All four of them were crouching together behind a sumach-bush in less than no time.

There was no mistake.

There, in the middle of the Gap road, rough as it was, stood a pretty good-looking horse, facing the other way, with a stout sort of wide-seated "sulky" or two-wheeled wagon behind him. Into that wagon they saw two men, one of them the squatter who had made Pat his errand-boy, lift the valise they took from the back of the thin beast that had carried it that far. They saw, too, the man of the "sulky" slowly count out and hand over what seemed like a number of bank bills or "greenbacks."

"Paying for the spelter," whispered Murray. "Now, boys, I'll have to follow that fellow when he goes. You tell Martin what's become

of me. Hello, he's got a gun. Is he going to shoot?"

He was, indeed, for he had just been remarking to the squatter:

"I reckoned there'd be birds or something. Now our biz is fixed I mean to have a little fun."

"All right. We can knock over as many as you want. It's just as well you shouldn't strike the valley till arter sundown."

"That's just the thing," said Murray to Van. "I'll take the woods on the other side of the road, and wait for that chap at the foot of the Gap beyond the mountains. Won't I fix him? You go back some distance before you use your guns."

"Don't you be scared about us," said Van. "If he should see us, he'll think we came at his own invitation."

"So he will. Good-bye. You'll hear from me again."

And without any further formalities the detective slipped away through the woods, and the boys were left to their own devices. Back they hurried for nearly half a mile, and then if anything worth shooting at got by them without

a peppering, it was because they did not happen to see it.

"This begins to look like pie," said Sol Rogers.

"Biggest kind of one," said Van. "Why, we've seven gray squirrels in little more than an hour ——"

"And the pigeons! We must have pretty nearly a dozen apiece. Pat, there's a lot in that tree; just about a good range for your cannon. That'll help you catch up with us."

He had been several birds behind up to that time, and only one of the squirrels had fallen to his share.

Half in vexation, therefore, he had poured an extra charge of powder and shot into his revolutionary gun, and he drew a good bead on those thickly-clustering pigeons.

Neither he nor his friends, however, had stopped to consider that for some time they had been working their way up the Gap again.

The roar of Pat's discharge was followed not only by the tumble of several birds, but by a loud shout from the bushes beyond, and then by a hail in anything but the choicest words.

"You young vagabonds! Who are you shooting at?"

It was the squatter and his friend who came rushing into view, the latter rubbing one of his arms, and seeming to have been made more or less a pigeon of by Pat's loose shot.

"He isn't hurt much, Pat," said Van. "The shot are too small to go into a man far at that distance. He is mad, though."

So he was; but while he was coming nearer and telling them so, they all had a good look at his face. It was by no means a handsome one, but they thought they should remember it.

"Do you mean to say," asked Sol, "that only one shot struck you?"

"Right on my arm, here."

"Well, I thought Patrick Nolan could do better than that. If you'll go back and let me try, I'll beat it all hollow."

"Oh, it's all right, Smith," interposed the squatter. "Those are the boys I told you of. I say, youngsters, you pick up your birds, and do your shooting lower down. The Gap's big enough for us all."

"But that shot is in my arm ——"

"Nonsense. It's only skin-deep, I'll bet. Besides, these ain't the sort of chaps to quarrel with."

"Pat," said Van, "pick up your birds. We'll go down the road. If the sport keeps up we'll have to go to our cart and get rid of our loads."

"You're all right," said the squatter, "only I'd rather keep out o' range o' that long gun. It's a reg'lar buster."

"It's made Pat's string longer than either of ours," remarked Sol. "Nine pigeons and one man at one shot."

They were just as well contented to go down as up, however, and the squatter and his "sulky" friend turned back with a mistaken assurance that the three boys knew nothing of the horses or the "cargo" at the head of the Gap. Little they imagined how thorough an inspection had been made by the New York detective while they were shooting pigeons.

"Aren't we laying in a pile," exclaimed Sol, an hour or so later. "It's almost getting tiresome."

"The more the merrier," said Van. "Mrs. Porrance means to have a crowd to-morrow, and

she's been baking all sorts of pies. We'll have our share."

When Murray parted from the three boys he pushed forward for some distance under cover of the woods. He carefully avoided all risk of exposing himself to the eyes of the squatter or the "sulky" man, but he did not for one moment lose sight of them. He even followed them for some distance after they set out on their pigeon-shooting, but only until he was sure they were well out of sight of the sulky itself.

Then, indeed, he hurried back like a man with business on his hands.

He did not open or remove the valise, an oblong, black, leather-covered sort of affair, but he lifted it and set it heavily down again, saying to himself:

"A good lot of it, but it's well-packed. It doesn't give a chink. Now I'll go down to the other side and do my own shooting. The more birds I have the less he'll suspect me, and the safer I'll be for a ride in with him."

On he went, therefore, and the road on the other side of the mountains was no better than

that towards Bunkerville, but it did not seem to have as much "game" about it. Still, there were pigeons and squirrels, and Murray did not disdain to shoot a poor old woodchuck that came out to look at him. He was a good shot, and by the middle of the afternoon he had quite enough of a "string" to sustain the character of a "sportsman," when the man with the sulky came along out of the Gap.

"Give ye a ride?" was the surly response to his first greeting. "Wall, no, I guess not. I've all I want to kerry."

"Didn't say give me anything. I'll pay a dollar for a lift. Do you s'pose I want to walk ten miles with all these birds and things?"

"A dollar? Well, now, that's a different thing ——"

It would have looked suspicious to have refused an offer like that, and, much against his will, the sulky man consented. He had no notion, however, how well the New York detective was pleased at having the change for the five-dollar bill he offered, in payment for his ride, handed to him in bright, new, shining, silver half dollars.

He could not have asked anything better just then, and he set out to make himself the most agreeable kind of road companion.

It was, as Murray had suggested, a good ten miles to the railway station, to which they both were bound, and by the time they arrived there it was quite dark. During that ride, however, the detective had acquired a good deal more information than his companion dreamed of giving him, and had made up his mind about what course to take. Not to wander too long and too far from the three young heroes of Bunker Academy, it is enough to say that, before two weeks were over, there had been at least a score of arrests made in town and country, in consequence of what was picked up by Murray during his day among the pigeons.

The biggest pigeon of all was the man to whom he paid a dollar for a ten mile drive in a sulky.

Great was the pride of Van Rivington and his two friends over the showing they were able to make on their arrival at Mrs. Porrance's, and that good lady was almost enthusiastic, not to say very nearly affectionate, in the expression of her gratification.

"Why, Almira," she said, "we can fricassee the squirrels and make a pie of the pigeons. We can roast some, too. And after all that there'll be more than we can eat, even if they all come, and I know they will."

"We brought 'em all home this time," remarked Van.

"But what shall we do with the rest? We don't want pigeons every day."

"Of course not. Send half a dozen or so to Mrs. Belden, and a good big string to Mrs. Sligo."

"The very thing. I'd like to get ahead of those Beldens, and I know Mr. Sligo likes pigeons."

"Dr. Betts ——" suggested Sol.

"He can go without, for once," said Van.

"But, Mrs. Porrance, are we not to have some supper?"

"Supper? Yes, indeed. Almira, bring in that pie. Both of 'em. If you boys haven't earned 'em this time, then nobody ever did."

Hot mince and pumpkin, hungry boys, a beaming landlady, and a grand dinner in prospect for the morrow.

Still, even while they were eating, the young sportsmen would have given something to have known a little more about what Murray was doing on the other side of Ragged Gap.

After supper, while Pat was at his chores, Sol and Van went down to Martin's to make their report, and the old gunsmith chuckled all over as he exclaimed :

"He'll get 'em, he'll get 'em. You're the boys for me. Tell Pat I don't care a cent for the money, and I'm right glad he isn't stuck in any sort of scrape."

Right glad was good little Mrs. Sligo for her share of the birds, but there was a bigger puzzle than ever in the mind of Mrs. Belden.

"No," she said to herself, "she'd never have done it of her own motion. I've got to thank her, I suppose, but it's all the work of those boys. They're real little gentlemen, especially that handsome young fellow from the city. We must get better acquainted with them."

There was no trouble about the soundness of the sleeping done at Mrs. Porrance's that night. In fact, it was no easy job to get up in time for breakfast, and to dress for church the

next morning; but it was made out, after a fashion.

And all the while Mr. Sligo and Mr. Belden were preaching, the pigeon pie was baking, and the stuffed birds were roasting in Mrs. Porrance's oven, and the squirrel fricassee was slowly simmering away; and neither Van, nor Sol, nor Pat, nor their landlady and her daughter, could quite succeed in driving those important facts out of their minds.

Worse than that, at least a dozen excellent people in Mr. Sligo's congregation caught themselves several times, in the very act of wondering "what Mrs. Porrance would have for dinner this time."

They were, every one of them, sure it would be something nice, for they had great confidence in Mrs. Porrance, and they felt equally certain there would be no second failure in a proper supply of pies, to wind up with.

Not one of them was overlooked by the portly widow, and not one of them refused to come.

Had they not counted on that very thing for a whole week?

Nor were they disappointed when they came

to sit down around the good cheer provided for them.

“Those boys again?” roundly exclaimed old Deacon Whitlock, a big-bodied, round-faced farmer, from the hills, when, at Mrs. Porrance’s request, he said grace and began to open the pigeon pie. “Do you mean to say we owe them a second game dinner? Wal, I do declar! Tell you what, Sister Porrance, there’s only one way out of this. You and Almiry’ll have to come and eat your Thanksgivin’ turkey at our house, and bring the boys along. We ain’t got no young folks to speak of, but they kin bring their guns and amuse themselves, and I’ll promise ’em all they kin eat, best kind.”

“Don’t you say no, Mrs. Porrance!” exclaimed Van.

“Indeed I won’t, then; you may be sure of that. It’s only about nine miles to drive. Will your house hold us all, deacon?”

“Hold ye? It’ll hold a regiment. I’ll hev ye stay all night. There’s loads of room.”

The steam from that pie was rising in the good deacon’s face, and it opened his heart and thawed his hospitality all the more, because he

was very hungry indeed, and because of a sort of weakness he had for fat pigeons.

The boys felt that they had made a good investment both for themselves and Mrs. Porrance, and she beamed upon them as she had never beamed before.

“Perhaps,” muttered Sol Rogers to himself, “it may even lead her to repent of her corn before pig-killing time.”

At all events, by the time the mince and pumpkin pies were served, the Thanksgiving-dinner business was all settled.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT THANKSGIVING DINNER

IF there is any one thing in the wide world that is entirely unsatisfactory to all concerned it is a November rain among the hills of New England.

Beyond a doubt it is an exceedingly useful thing, doing all sorts of good to land and trees and crops, to springs, lakes, rivers, and so forth ; but, for all that, it is dismal while it lasts.

Then, too, it is apt to last so long.

That one did.

The September and October weather had been glorious, the very perfection of an American autumn, but with that Monday morning the clouds and the east wind began their work, and they kept at it steadily all the week long.

No ball-playing on the green, no skylarking at noon recess, no fun of any kind that boys care for was possible during that cold, chilling, steady pour.

The only consolation was the oft-repeated remark of Mrs. Porrance that she "was glad it had come now, so's to have done with it and make sure of good weather for Thanksgivin'." And Sol Rogers had added :

"Well, it does look as if all the bad weather there was would be used up if this thing keeps on."

So the boys spent a good deal of time in their room, where Mrs. Porrance had now put up a good, square-built, cast-iron stove, and they did good work on their school-books. They did even more upon Pat Nolan's big volumes of novels, and in practicing all the songs they knew of. Besides that, they took time to write a wonderful lot of long letters home, giving the most graphic accounts of their experiences thus far as students of Bunker Academy, and as sportsmen extraordinary for Ragged Gap and the surrounding country.

Even a rainy week, however, with a rainy Sunday at the end of it, must come to an end, and so it was with that one. Bob and Joe Hinckley even, who had made their appearance again, with clean faces, put on a show of cheer-

fulness and good nature when the sun came out bright and clear with the opening of "Thanksgiving week."

Monday and Tuesday would be regular school-days, of course, but so many of the scholars were going on Wednesday to be home on Thursday, that there was small use in opening the academy on either Wednesday or Friday. So that part of the week was about as good as one long holiday, and the boys prepared to treat it as such.

"Somehow or other," said Van, "we must work into the affections of Deacon Whitlock. I want to see what sort of thing a New England farm is. They say his is a good one."

"Biggest kind," said Sol. "I know all about him. He isn't exactly mean, but he isn't an easy sort of man to get inside of."

"Guess not. Anyhow, we're to go there. Something'll turn up, sure's you're born."

They were scarcely looking for the precise thing that turned up that Tuesday evening.

It was Denis Mullaly, and with him no less a man than their friend Murray.

The two came straight to the house and to

Van's room, where Sol was already, and Pat was quickly summoned.

"It's all fixed," said the detective. "We're to gobble 'em to-morrow. Denis and I thought it was only fair to you boys to have you come along. Don't say a word to anybody. Cut school. We'll start from the tavern with a team of our own about eight o'clock. What do you say?"

"Say?" exclaimed Sol. "What do we say? Did you s'pose we'd say we wouldn't come?"

"Little o' that," said Denis.

"We'll be on hand," said Van. "Even Pat'll raise courage to be one of that crowd—won't you, Pat?"

"Will I? Won't I? Would I ever forgive myself if I didn't?"

"We've got 'em all," said Murray. "Three of our fellows are to come through the Gap. You can bring your guns along, but I guess there won't be any time to go for pigeons."

Denis and Murray made their call a short one, but they left behind them the three most excited and uneasy boys in Bunkerville, or almost anywhere else.

"Van," said Sol, "it sounds like something out of a novel."

"Novel? Did you ever read anything better than it's been from the first? If it were all written out and printed, nobody'd believe a word of it."

"I would, then," said Pat, "and I'm going to write the whole of it for my mother and old Maguire."

It was well they had one another to talk to, or it would not have been so easy to keep so big a secret; but keep it they did, and there was small chance of their being seen in Bunkerville after eight o'clock next morning.

Nor were they, and even Mrs. Porrance and Miss Almira wondered how they could have disappeared so suddenly.

"Taken their guns with 'em, too," said the widow, as she came down from an inspection of their room. "Where can they have gone?"

"It's a sort of half-holiday at the academy," said Almira. "They never played hookey before."

"Don't care if they did. What beats me is that they didn't say a word about it beforehand."

"It's that Sol Rogers. He's up to any kind of mischief."

"Is he? Well, perhaps he is, but Van Rivington is even with him, any day. So's Pat. Anyhow, we'll know more about it when they get home."

That sounded reasonable, and, meantime, the three friends were being whirled away toward the Gap in a big lumber wagon, containing, besides themselves, Denis Mullaly, Murray and two stalwart fellows whom Van set down for constables. With the three detectives who were said to be coming over the mountain, there was sure to be force enough, as Sol said, to arrest two men.

"And the dogs," said Pat.

"Yes," said Sol; "I'd forgot about the dogs."

The horses and wagon were left in the wood-road, half a mile below the cabin, and the whole party pushed forward on foot.

"The boys were to set out at daylight," said Murray, "and show in the clearing at ten o'clock precisely. If nothing's gone wrong they'll keep time to a fraction of a minute."

Very peaceful that rude bit of clearing looked,

as the intruders reached the edge of the woods. It was a quarter before ten o'clock, and they would not, therefore, have any long time to wait. The blue smoke was curling from the mud-chimney of the cabin. The horses were loose, and were trying to pick a breakfast from the thin grass on the mountainside. So was the cow. The two hounds had been reposing lazily on the door-step, but now, as if they scented the approach of danger, were beginning to stretch themselves, and take turns in uttering deep notes of canine warning.

In answer to the baying of the dogs, one of the squatters shortly came to the door and looked sharply around, but he saw no one, and had probably been called out in that useless way a good many times before that, for he aimed an impatient sort of kick at the nearest hound, and went in again.

Just then Murray put his watch back into his pocket with a sharp click, remarking :

“Ten o'clock. Forward !”

Forward it was, and, almost at the same instant, three men sprang out of the woods on the opposite side of the clearing.

"They're on time," said Murray. "But what a racket those dogs are making now!"

They were, indeed, but he and his men, both parties, were within a hundred yards of the door of the cabin before it again swung open.

They could hear the squatter who opened it exclaim:

"Guns and pistols, Bill. We're cornered this time."

And the second squatter came to the door with a rifle in his hand, only to say, with an oath, as he looked out upon his rapidly advancing enemies:

"No use. Too many of 'em. It's too late. There's them three boys with 'em. We're done for."

The odds were indeed a little too heavy, and anything like running away was as much out of the question as resistance.

Neither was any time given them for the destruction of dangerous material in the cabin, for Murray and his men were charging in at the cabin double quick.

Besides, the two squatters were not blood-thirsty desperadoes of the Robert Kyd stamp,

but mere commonplace rascals, such as almost all criminals really are, who preferred counterfeiting and loafing to any kind of hard work, but who had no stomach for a fight with three or four times their own number, in broad daylight.

So, in a minute or so more the detectives and constables, followed by Van and Sol and Pat, were safely inside the cabin, and the two squatters had handcuffs on their wrists. There was no sort of doubt of their guilt, for they had actually been surprised at their work, and a crucible of melted metal was simmering on the fire, while the floor was strewn with plaster-of-paris molds and other tools of their miserable, cowardly trade. A further search revealed quite a quantity of base coin, halves and quarters, made up, ready for transportation through the Gap.

"It wasn't a bad idea of theirs," said Murray, "to make that stuff out here among the hills. They've been at it a good while, and they fooled us a deal better than they could have done in the city. The whole gang's broken up now. Let's make a clean sweep."

"I say, Van," said Sol, "if there isn't another buck."

There he was, indeed, and a fine, fat one, hung up by the heels against the side of the cabin.

“Fair plunder,” remarked Murray; “but we can’t do anything with him. You and the two Bunkerville constables divide him. Split him lengthwise right in the middle. We owe you boys that much, I guess.”

They did, indeed, for they were winning pretty handsome rewards by their capture, and the two constables were quite satisfied with the manner of the division.

The two horses of the counterfeiters were quickly hitched up and their wagon loaded with their rude effects. One of the constables said he would come back after the cow.

Then the officers and their captives, with the boys, got into the lumber-wagon which had brought them, and Murray ordered a return to Bunkerville.

“It’s proud I am of yez,” said Denis Mullaly to Pat. “This all comes of their tryin’ to make a fool of an Irish boy.”

Pat could not see very clearly, for his own part, what he had done to distinguish himself, but he was glad the whole thing was over.

Great was the astonishment of Mrs. Porrance and Almira, about one o'clock that day, when a wagon stopped before their door and out of it got, not only their three boarders, but the half of an exceedingly prosperous-looking deer, horns and all. Van had given up the skin again to keep the horns.

"Boys," exclaimed the widow, "have you been hunting?"

"Not exactly," said Van; "but this is our deer. We must take that leg with us to the deacon's."

"He don't need anything for his Thanksgiving."

"You don't know, Mrs. Porrance," said Sol. "What's more, we've a big story to tell him, and he won't believe half of it unless we bring him some venison."

"You're the queerest lot of boys I ever saw. Come along with it. Into the kitchen. I s'pose I'll have to let you have your own way."

"Oh, Mr. Rivington," exclaimed Almira, "please do tell me the story. Is it very romantic?"

All Bunkerville was alive for the remainder

of that day and evening with the novel sensation of the discovery and arrest of the two counterfeiters.

"Mrs. Betts," said the doctor to his wife at supper, "I never in all my life had three such boys as those on hand at one and the same time. I feel surer than ever that they knew something about that hornet business."

"They seem to get into almost everything."

"Why, it's said that it was through their means those fellows were arrested to-day."

"The counterfeiters?"

"Yes. Somehow or other, the young scamps got on their track while they were out hunting."

"I should think they'd have been afraid to meddle."

"Afraid? It isn't in them. I shall have to keep an eye on them. And yet they seem well disposed."

"They'd make trouble enough if they were not."

"So they would."

And at that very hour Sol Rogers and his friends were standing a terrific "interview" at the hands of Mr. Rickards, of the Bunkerville

Clarion, while Almira Porrance sat by, for it took place in the parlor, with an unbroken smile of wonder on her face, and even her mother condescended to be astonished, for once in her life.

It was a grand thing for the *Clarion*, only when the account written by the editor was printed, there was room for some difficulty among his readers to determine clearly whether or not he himself had been present at the capture. Or if, indeed, the whole thing, except the actual coining of the false money, had not taken place in the editorial office of the *Clarion*, as a regular part of its "extraordinary journalistic enterprise."

There was a fair chance for Bob and Joe Hinkley and their crowd to choke with envy now. That is, if they ventured to read the *Clarion*. Copies of it were duly mailed to at least three distant homes, but before it was printed there had been more fun for our heroes.

Quiet fun indeed, beginning with an early start next morning, behind the two ponies and in Mrs. Porrance's big spring-wagon.

Sol and Van and Pat, guns and all, with the leg of venison stowed under the back seat ; and

Mrs. Porrance said, as she locked the door of her house behind her :

“It’s years and years since I’ve left it all alone. I guess it can take care of itself for a day or two.”

It was quite likely it could, in so honest and orderly a community as Bunkerville, especially as nobody knew its owners had departed.

Anything like a burglary had not been heard of in that valley since the Indians were driven out of it.

The road to Deacon Whitlock’s was a pretty good one, but a large share of it was up-hill. So much so that Sol Rogers remarked :

“He must be a wonderfully good man, now, to come to meeting with a drive like this to get home again.”

“It’s pretty bad at some seasons,” said the widow, “and in winter he’s snowed in half the time. But his farm’s a good one when you get there.”

“It ought to be,” said Van.

The nine miles were long ones, sure enough, but they led through more than a little fine scenery, as well as some that was not so fine.

At last, as the ponies paused for breath on the brow of a hill, Mrs. Porrance pointed down into the level valley below, with a bit of a lake in the middle of it, and said :

“All that belongs to Deacon Whitlock, and that’s his house.”

“House?” exclaimed Sol; “why, it looks like a village of big barns.”

So it did, but the house was there, nevertheless, and when Pat pulled in the ponies at the gate there was the deacon himself, and his wife, and two grown-up daughters older than Almira, and a half a dozen more crowding out of the ample front porch to welcome the visitors from the village.

“Big enough,” said Sol to Van; “why, that house reaches out every which way.”

And so it did, for it had been built a piece at a time ever since the country was settled, and each new Whitlock that had come to own it had stuck on his addition to please himself.

They had all, evidently, been men of more breadth than height in their architectural ideas, and only the central building could boast of more than one story.

To balance that, however, there were no small rooms, and there was any required amount of cellar under all.

A grand old farmhouse, well kept up, without a sign of shabbiness or decay, for Deacon Whitlock was a "forehanded man," as his fathers had been before him.

"Glad to see you, Mrs. Porrance. Glad to see you, Almira. The boys, too. This 'ere's the first Thanksgivin' I've knowed that none of mine could make out to come home. They're too far away, most of 'em."

Van thought he noticed a bit of tremor in the old man's tone as he said that, for Mrs. Porrance had already told him that two of the deacon's boys were sleeping on "far-away" battle-fields; one was in Europe, one in California, one, the last to leave, was near enough; but he had married against his father's will, and neither he nor his wife nor their babies were welcome at the farmhouse.

There is a good deal of natural born stubbornness among those old hill country farmers of New England, and sometimes it crops out in one way and sometimes in another.

The old man's face put on a queer expression when Sol Rogers lugged out the leg of venison.

"You thought likely we wouldn't give ye enough to eat, eh?"

"No, Deacon Whitlock," interposed Mrs. Porrance, "the boys have got a long story to tell you, and that's a part of it. I let them have their own way."

"Oh! it's a story, is it? That's all right. Bring it in, boys. We'll have some cuts of it briled. Come in, all of ye. Why, boys, I've killed deer all over this 'ore valley. I shot a bear, once, right down there between them two barns. That is, about where they air now. I'll tell ye all about it some time."

The day was not a bitterly cold one, but quite crisp enough to warrant the blazing fires in Deacon Whitlock's big fireplace.

Neither Van Rivington nor Pat Nolan had ever seen anything like it before, and they did not wonder at all at the strong prejudice the old man expressed against stoves.

"Have to have 'em in the parlor," he told them, "but I don't mean to let 'em in anywhere

else; not so long as my wood lots hold out. That 'll be for my time, I guess."

Dinner was not to be ready till two o'clock, or after, and Mrs. Porrance and Almira were speedily busy with Mrs. Whitlock and her daughters in grave consultation over the cookery.

The boys saw that their landlady was looked up to as an authority in such matters, and Sol whispered to Van :

"What couldn't she tell 'em about corn? We won't have a grain to-day, I'm afraid."

The boys had been sitting around in all sorts of uneasiness, scarcely knowing what to do with themselves, when they heard Mr. Whitlock's better-half exclaim, from the kitchen :

"Now, deacon, where on earth are you goin' with that there gun?"

"Goin'? Why, the boys must be doin' some-thin' or they'll spile. Won't have no kind of an appetite for their dinner. We're all goin' down to the swamp arter some rabbits."

"There ain't a speck o' snow on the ground to track 'em by."

"Can't help that. Old Fan 'll know where to find 'em."

And in another minute he was among "the boys," calling upon them to follow him to the swamp.

A dry sort of a swamp it was, too, at that season, a good half-mile from the house towards the bit of a lake, all bushes and scrubby trees and coarse grass, among which old "Fan," a sort of mongrel setter dog, lame of one leg, dashed in and out as if she, too, had an appetite to win.

The deacon took his station, gun in hand, at the western corner of the swamp, of which there were at least twenty acres, bidding his young friends scatter themselves further along on the border, and be careful not to shoot each other.

"Fan'll have a rabbit out very quick, or I'm mistaken. You'll have to shoot 'em running. No waitin' for still shots."

And so it proved, for in less than three minutes the deacon himself showed them how. Big and clumsy as his gun looked, like himself, he did not miss the rabbit. Over it rolled, and Fan dashed back into the swamp, like the keen old huntress that she was, without waiting orders.

The next "jumper," as Sol called them, came

out for Pat Nolan, but before he could raise his heavy weapon it was out of sight, with Fan at its heels.

Up and across the field went the rabbit, at a great pace, and poor Pat looked ruefully after it, feeling as if he had lost the honors of the day.

Across, then back, and then suddenly doubling for the swamp again, the fugitive came bounding within range of both Sol and Van.

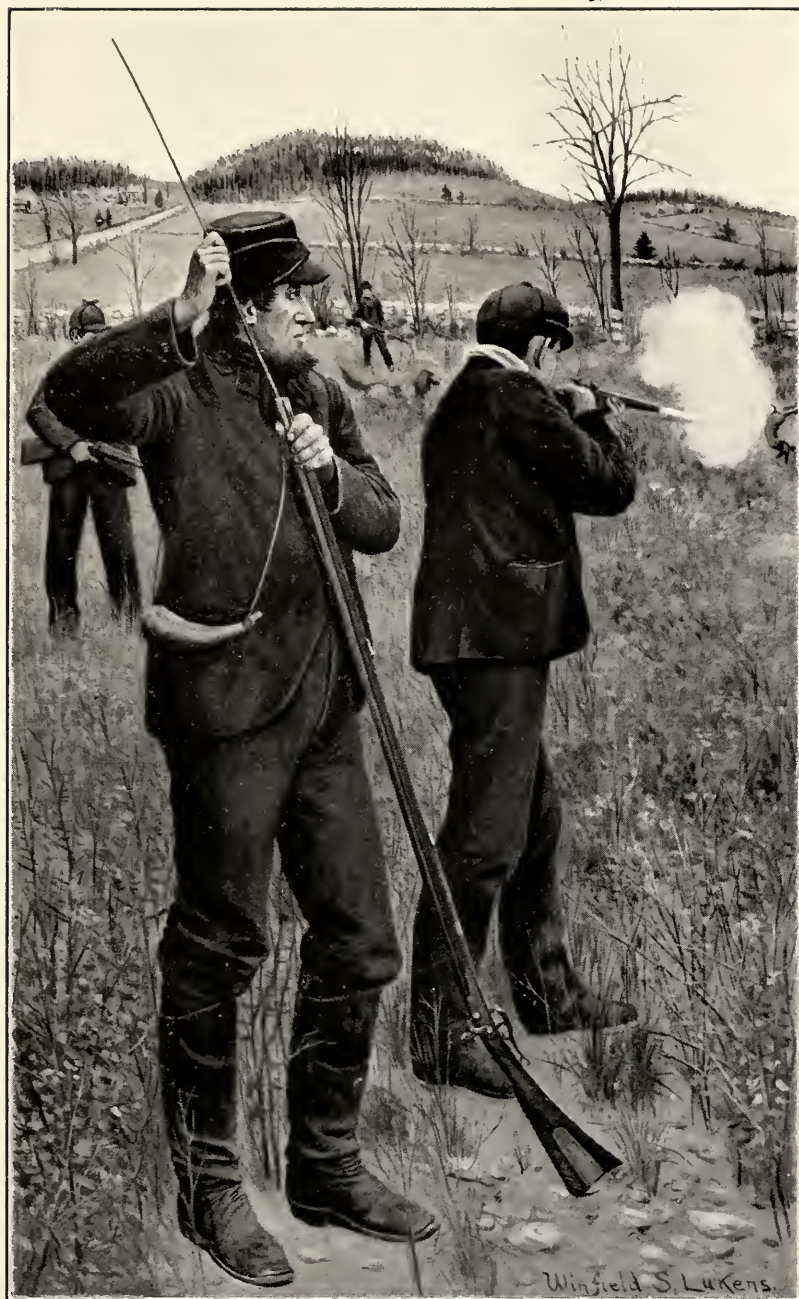
Sol had been watching almost breathlessly the race between the dog and rabbit, but Van was ready to a second, and the first "running shot" he had ever made in his life was a complete success. The nimble game rolled over, and Deacon Whitlock himself roared a great shout of approval and exultation.

"You'll learn, you will. That was a good shot. Look out! Fan's gone in again."

So she had, and in the course of the next two hours they had three rabbits more among them, Sol alone failing to count one for his own gun.

"What's the matter, Sol?" asked Van.
"Won't your gun hit the rabbits?"

"Of course it will. The fault's with the rabbits."



"THAT WAS A GOOD SHOT"

"What's the matter with them?" asked Pat.
"They're good enough rabbits, for all I can see."

"So they are. Deacon Whitlock, what's the matter with the rabbits that I didn't kill any?"

"Can't say, Sol. Maybe they don't know you yet. You must stay and get acquainted. How's your appetite coming on?"

"Appetite? Oh, there's nothing the matter with that."

"Then we'd better set out for the house. There'll be just about good time now to get ready for dinner. Seems to me I could eat something myself."

The boys all thought so, afterwards, when they saw him at work. He could scarcely have needed any rabbit-shooting to get him ready.

But what a dinner that was!

The great dining-room of the old farmhouse looked as if it had been made for such a dinner.

The table itself was a big one, at any time, and it had been lengthened for the occasion. Nor was there any too much of it, for the deacon had provided mouths for his dinner. His three stalwart farm-hands were there, and so were several vigorous old people of the neighborhood,

as well as Mrs. Porrance's party, besides the Whitlock family itself. There was nothing stuck-up or aristocratic about the deacon, for all his broad acres and his obstinate temper.

Plenty of good appetite around the table, and then the things on it!

A huge stuffed turkey, as a matter of course. No Thanksgiving dinner would have been complete without that.

Roast chickens, such as do not often get into city markets.

A noble little martyr of a roast pig. That was a notion of the deacon's.

Steaks from the boys' own venison, out of compliment to them.

No end of vegetables, and all that sort of thing.

Everything well-cooked and in overwhelming abundance, and "helped around" in almost too great an anxiety that every one should have the best and enough of it.

The feast went on, amid a continual talk among the older people about old times, and marvelous were some of the stories which were listened to.

There came an end at last, however, or at least a change, for the table was cleared for the coming of the pies, nuts, apples and cider.

Then Deacon Whitlock straightened himself in his big chair at the end of the table and said :

“ Now, boys, for the story about that venison. We’re ready for it.”

“ Van,” said Pat and Sol, almost in the same breath, “ you tell it.”

“ I’ll try,” said Van ; but he felt as if he had undertaken a big job.

Tell it he did, however, and not at too great length, either, and they all listened splendidly, except that they worked away at the eatables all the same.

“ Caught ’em, did they ?” exclaimed the deacon, as Van concluded. “ Caught ’em and locked ’em up. Well, I declare ! That beats bear-killing. It’s almost up to Indians. I’m glad you fetched the venison, for it does help to make it all real.”

“ It’s true, every word of it,” remarked Mrs. Porrance, and Almira added :

“ There will be a full account of it printed in the *Clarion*.”

"Boys!" said the deacon, "you must stay over to-morrow and help eat those rabbits. Mebbe we can show you some more shooting. Needn't go till Saturday; need they, Mrs. Porrance?"

"Of course not. But look there, Deacon Whitlock! Out of the window!"

"Snow, sure's you live! Time it came. It's held off later'n usual. We can track game to-morrow, boys. Winter's coming."

The three youngsters were already at the window, gazing almost excitedly upon the fast-falling, feathery flakes.

"The fall months are over," continued the deacon. "Now for sleighin' and coastin' and skatin' and snowballin', eh? I used to be a boy once, years and years ago, and nothin' ever tickled me like the first snow."

"That's just the way we feel about it," said Sol Rogers. But Van asked:

"Deacon Whitlock, is there as much fun in winter in the country as there is in autumn?"

"Twice as much."

"I mean for boys at school?"

"That was the only time o' year we went to

school when I was a boy. The rest of the year we had to work. Why, your fun's all ahead of you, or I'm much mistaken."

"Well, then," said Pat Nolan, "if there's more going on in winter than there's been since we came, I'd like to have the longest kind of winter."

"It'll be long enough before it's over," said Mrs. Porrance. "But I wonder why it is that it always snows on Thanksgiving Day?"

And while the old folks were busily discussing that grave question the three boys looked at one another and out of the window.

"The country's a big thing," slowly remarked Pat Nolan.

"It's grand all the time," said Sol.

"Boys," said Van Rivington, "seems to me I'm a year older than I was when I left home."

And so he was.

THE END

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